

DAVID EMERSON

FITZWARREN

A PORTRAIT

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For
MY FATHER AND MOTHER

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BOOK I
BEGINNINGS

CHAPTER I

STONE

§ I

FOR many years—until quite recently, in fact—Fitzwarren's portrait by Sir Thomas Lawrence hung in the Library at Stone, quite near the big Italian window, and directly opposite the portrait of his mother. It was never, in its earliest days, a masterpiece—few of Lawrence's paintings were that—and age had not improved it. But sometimes, particularly on summer evenings, when the late sunshine slanted in through the window, a subtle change would steal over the canvas. Fitzwarren's famous eyes, melancholy, faintly smiling, would seem to be alive and to be seeing things—the episodes, it might be, of his own career; the memories of many easy victories; the memory, too, of that final overwhelming defeat. . . .

That was how the portrait struck me, when the light was good and the moment propitious. At other times it was little better than commonplace. Lawrence had clearly been oppressed by the consideration that it was the best-looking man in London before him in the studio. He obviously felt that something superhumanly beautiful was required of him—a model of masculine perfection rather than a revelation of the sitter's personality. To flatter was in his blood. He did it instinctively, not entirely, because it paid him, but also because he liked doing it.

So that his picture of Fitzwarren is inevitably a gilding of the lily. It has a womanish, languishing air,

a disagreeable softness which accords well enough perhaps with the conventional estimate of Fitzwarren's character but which is founded nevertheless on a wholly superficial conception of the man. For it must not be forgotten that Fitzwarren sat to Lawrence in February, 1808, shortly after his second return from Russia. He was thirty-five then, and he must have thought that his life was over. As things turned out, it was not. Years of useful work, half a lifetime of solid domestic contentments, lay before him. But of course, he was not to know that. And he had been through a good deal. The mark of pain—without which few men's faces are worth a second glance—had imparted strength and character to his too, too regular features. He was mature, a man in his prime—and also an inveterate gambler, who had just staked his fortune on one throw, and lost.

However, Lawrence chose to paint an idealized Fitzwarren, his flawless technique prevailing, as always, over his artistic probity. And in any case, the portrait hangs in the Library at Stone no longer, Stone itself having been pulled down soon after the Corporation of Stonham bought it. It was, naturally, the grounds of the place that the Corporation wanted—the rose-garden, the lake, the wide acres of the park—for the recreation of its citizens in perpetuity. They might have turned the house into a branch art gallery or a refreshment pavilion. But they did not, and I am inclined to think that their decision was right. I should not have liked to be there on the morning when the housebreakers came and found their victim, white and serene and disdainful as Marie Antoinette before the rabble. But on the other hand, neither should I have cared to see the walls hung with Vic-

torian genre paintings—*The Course of True Love, Coming from the Fair* and the rest—or to sit over tea and cakes in the solemn old Library with forty other festive Stonhamites, moist and garrulous from an afternoon's play on the public tennis-courts. . . .

Anyhow, the Corporation decided the matter for me, the power of the purse—largely a monopoly of Corporations in these days—giving them a clear right to do so. There was a tremendous auction sale lasting a fortnight, in the course of which the best of the pictures were acquired by London dealers, Lawrence's Portrait of Lord Norton Fitzwarren going to one dark, expensive little West End shop, his mother's picture to another.

Subsequently, both journeyed to America where, so far as I know, they still are.

§ II

On a September morning, some years before the first ominous cracks began to appear in the ancient fabric of English life, the Fitzwarren family stood under the portico at Stone, waiting for a carriage to drive round from the stables.

The Marquis, plainly dressed, rather silent, with an air of quiet authority, negligently fondled the big Airedale standing with forepaws on his master's coat to have his head scratched. Apparently the fondling lacked vigour, for the Airedale started to "show off", jumping up affectionately with a great display of pink tongue.

"Get down, dirty beast," said the Marquis equably. Then, with no change of tone: "That carriage is a long time coming round."

Beneath his imperturbable exterior, he was perceptibly ill at ease, as though some sort of ordeal were before him.

"It ought to be here by now," he added. "I shall have to give up my morning ride if you people keep me about much longer."

The affectation of severity elicited no response.

His wife cleared her throat, fidgeted and surreptitiously disposed of an inconvenient tear.

"Quite a cool wind," she remarked, in extenuation.

The Marquis glanced across at her, and then at the three girls by the door. "Go and see if Lord Calne is ready, Augusta," he said to the tallest and gawkiest.

"No, I'll go, Augusta." The elder Fitzwarren son—Earl Goward by courtesy—restrained his half-sister with an important gesture. He was the child of a previous marriage of the Marquis, and his grandfather on his mother's side had been a Duke—a circumstance which, it sometimes seemed, Goward felt rather keenly.

"All right, you go then, Goward," the Marquis agreed. "Hurry him up. . . . I think I hear the carriage coming."

He turned to speak to a small fair-haired boy in a blue white-collared suit, leaning with a rather too elaborate nonchalance against one of the pillars.

"Put your hat on, Norton," he said. "And kiss your mother and sisters good-bye."

Without a word, the little boy proceeded to obey. One always obeyed the Marquis, as a matter of course. But apart from this he was an obeying sort of little boy. And this morning he was desperately uneasy lest he should cry.

From round the corner came the sound of carriage-wheels, and simultaneously the constitutionally pompous tones of Goward became audible, as he descended the stairs.

"No, sir," Goward was saying, "I should say, on the whole, it will not rain."

A moment later he appeared at the door, advanced to the head of the balustraded steps and surveyed the vault of heaven with a proprietary eye.

"Fine for twenty-four hours, Lord Calne," he announced.

The visitor (first Baron Calne, of Calne, Wilts) emerged from the shadows of the hall—a seasoned man of the world, leisurely, mild-mannered, carrying himself with the assurance of one long familiar with the best and the worst of life.

"Where's my travelling-companion?" he enquired.

Norton was kissing Susan good-bye. He had got through with Augusta and Charlotte very well without disgracing himself, but this was definitely a severer test.

Susan said: "Good-bye, old Norton."

She was smiling, so he smiled back. Good old Susan, she wouldn't let him down!

"Great friends, those two," Goward was explaining to Lord Calne. "Inseparables. Only a year between them, you see."

Now Norton had reached his father, and his father was putting out a large hand for him to take.

"Be a good boy at school, Norton," his father said. "And stick to your books. Remember Doctor Pulteney will tell me how you are getting on."

The words were formal, even hard, but the eyes of the Marquis were not hard, nor the gentle, sensitive lines of his lips. He was a shy man, uncomfortable where his emotions were concerned, and apt to screen himself behind a thorny hedge of brusqueness.

Norton's eyes were fixed upon the bottom button of his father's waistcoat with the pathetic and admirable self-control of the very young. He replied simply,

"Good-bye, sir", venturing no comment on his father's exhortation to virtue.

Goward came forward. "Good-bye, Norton. You ought to be starting. Now, any difficulty over your lessons—just write about it to me, won't you? It isn't long since I was going to school for the first time, you know." He patted Norton's shoulder, ponderously condescending and pleasant, adding modestly, "I still remember quite a lot of what I learnt, though you might not think it."

The Marchioness, clasping a moist handkerchief tightly in one hand, for the wind was still sharp, steeled herself against the final moment. Norton was standing before her expectantly, near enough for her to have stroked his beautiful wavy fair hair. . . . So little a time ago, since that fair head had been tiny, unbelievably tiny, unutterably sweet. . . . The last of her four babies—Norton. . . . "Let me know if you get plenty to eat there," she said. "And write at least once a week, won't you . . . ?" Mere meaningless words, words to fill the breach, to keep back the tears. Last night in his bedroom—that had been the real good-bye. He had said his prayers to her—for the last time, she knew. When he came back, he wouldn't do that any more. He would be a boy amongst boys, not her baby any longer. "And tell us what friends you make," she said. "They say little Lord Rookwith is with Doctor Pulteney. You will see a great deal of him, I expect. . . . Well, good-bye, Norton."

She kissed him. The little figure in the white-collared blue suit was descending the steps, getting into the carriage, sitting down. Lord Calne, urbane, ambassadorial, was making his adieux.

"I'll see him settled in, Lady Stone," he assured her. "We shall get on famously together."

"So good of you to take so much trouble," she murmured.

"Not at all, not at all."

He seated himself beside Norton and raised his elegant Paris-made hat. There were a few last common-places. Then the man spoke to the horses. The carriage wheels crunched on the gravel.

Lady Stone waved the little crumpled handkerchief. "Good-bye, dear!" Marvellously, the tears were keeping back. "Good-bye! Good-bye!"

The carriage turned the bend of the drive and passed behind a long laurel hedge, reappearing again for a few minutes before it finally vanished. Very faintly, a small hand could be seen waving once or twice, in a forlorn self-conscious fashion.

"Well, well!" The Marquis turned back to the door. "That's another one started."

"Yes. It will be so much nicer for him at school than at home with us and the girls."

Lady Stone had said this many times before, and once, when Norton's going was a long way ahead in the future, she had really meant it.

"I'll go for my ride now," said the Marquis.

"Yes, dear."

She understood what was in his mind. No little Norton to ride with to-day. For two years or more, they had gone out every morning together, the big man and the slender little boy, the bay hunter and the white pony, familiar figures to all the cottagers in the lanes about Stone.

She lingered on under the portico, cherishing perhaps an impossible hope that Norton might return for something. The girls had slipped away. Goward, she knew, would be found in the Library. By and

by she saw her husband, on the bay hunter, riding across the park in the direction of Stonham. She sighed, with a little catch of the breath, and went indoors.

Chance took her to the powdering-room. Or it might not have been chance. The powdering-room was a quiet retreat, in case she should want to give way to tears. This morning, however, it was tenanted already. A noise of muffled sobbing came from the big chair, where the small figure of Susan lay curled up. . . .

When they had had their good cry together, and it was all over and done with, she went to her own room and took ink and paper.

"My dearest little Norton," she wrote. Then she paused. Would he be a *good* boy, she wondered, now that he had gone away from her? She had been so careful of him, so anxious for him. And some of these schools— She averted her mind from certain things people had told her. But of course it wasn't like a great public school where, everybody knew, *all sorts* of things went on. And young Rookwith being there—

"Your going away this morning made your Papa and sisters and me very melancholy," she continued. "I'm sure Papa looked quite lonely riding off over the park by himself. I wonder how you will like living at Hammersmith. I don't think Goward was right about the weather, for it is beginning to look like rain already. . . ."

§ III

The Fitzwarrens had probably come over with the Conqueror. At all events several villages up and down the country are named after them, and they were certainly among the great border lords of the Welsh Marches about the time of Cœur-de-Lion. History-

or the stirring stuff that does duty for the history of that period—paints them cruel, quarrelsome, turbulent, an authentic product of the age which invented for their kind the fabulous but entertaining *droit de seigneur*. One, of a younger, milder branch, figures in the Whittington story. Then, somehow, they died out, or appeared to die out. Possibly most of them were killed, with the rest of the old baronage, during the Wars of the Roses. Nobody knows for certain. After two hundred years or so of salutary obscurity, the family comes to the surface again in the persons of a line of baronets in the Midlands, quite peaceable, law-abiding, land-owning folk, with all their old characteristics shed away—very properly, in an age which did not care for such things. And so, in due course, the fourth baronet became the first baron (of the new line), to help create a Government majority in the Lords; the second baron was made the first earl as a reward for raising a loyal regiment of foot at the time of the Young Pretender's rebellion; and the second earl was created first Marquis of Stone because he was a local magnate who owned a number of boroughs and had to be kept in with.

Norton, first Marquis, now jogging across the park on his bay hunter, had been married three times. He had passionately adored his first wife and deeply respected the other two. She had been a poor girl, that faraway bride of his youth. There had been trouble with his father about the affair. But somehow he had overcome the difficulties and married her. And then, a year later, she had died of small-pox, together with her month-old baby. . . . All long ago now, of course—an episode he rarely thought about. Only, as he grew older—and he was sixty now—he

found his mind turning to it rather more. It tended to become more vivid. . . . More vivid, for instance, than the memory of the duke's daughter, his second bride. She had been a "fine woman", a perfect and impeccable social partner, the architect—he acknowledged it frankly—of whatever success he had had in the world. But for her he would never have been President of the Council; but for her they would never have asked him, once, to form a ministry—an invitation he had declined on her advice. Indeed, when you came down to fundamentals, it was probably she who had engineered the marquise. If so, it was her last achievement, for she died suddenly the year after, leaving him her two children, Goward and Louisa, to bring up.

It was partly because of Goward and Louisa that he had married his third wife, a Scotch earl's daughter, twenty years younger than himself. She wasn't a beauty; she certainly hadn't a fortune; but she seemed a sensible well-born girl, a girl, moreover, who had seen something of the world as a Bedchamber-woman to the young King's sister.

Her family, he soon found, had the gift of fruitfulness. In five years she bore him four children—the three girls and Norton. She had a bad time with Norton—it had been touch and go. But she pulled through at last, leaving behind her, however, the power of producing any more Fitzwarrens, and the remains of such good looks as she had ever possessed.

That had been wellnigh ten years ago. Since then a happy uneventfulness had brooded over Stone. Louisa's marriage, Goward's entry into the world of politics—these had been the only landmarks.

And now Norton, the baby, had gone away to school.

The Marquis, walking the bay hunter through Longstone Wood, felt suddenly old and sad, for the years were flying past and he had great possessions.

§ IV

Meanwhile Lord Calne's carriage bowled steadily along the main roads through the Midland shires.

Its owner, lounging in a corner, from time to time looked reflectively over at the small boy opposite. A pretty boy, too girlish perhaps—an insipid personality, except for his fine eyes. Too sheltered an existence boys led nowadays. Not enough rough and tumble. He had advised Lady Stone to send the boy to a public school—Eton for preference. But she wouldn't hear of it. Somebody had been telling her lurid tales, no doubt.

"But, my dear lady," he had protested, "a boy can keep himself nice and—well, *clean*, quite as well at a public school as at some little private place."

She had looked distant, as though she was pretending not to take his meaning, and changed the subject.

Later, they had "heard of" the academy of Doctor Pulteney, and as he was staying at Stone just then, on his way from his little estate in the North to Hammer-smith, where he had a house on the river, he offered to take Norton to school.

The boy was quiet and subdued. His conversation did not dare much beyond "Yes, sir" and "No, sir". He watched the other vehicles on the road—a gaudy stage-coach, a hay-wain, a smart post-chaise—without volunteering any remarks.

"Ever been to London before?" Lord Calne asked him.

"No, sir." Norton had never been to London, it seemed.

"Well, tell me where you have been."

"I've been to Stonham a good deal, of course. And last year we went to Bath. Papa had to take the waters."

The sustained effort left him apparently exhausted.

"Nowhere else?" Lord Calne pressed him.

Norton considered. No, there was nowhere else he could remember.

Lord Calne took a new line.

"What do you want to be when you're a man?"

The question was an embarrassing one, for Norton had secretly decided to spend his manhood living with Susan in the gamekeeper's cottage in Longstone Wood. This was clearly not an acknowledgeable ambition, so he fell back on a safe reply:

"I haven't made up my mind, sir."

He wished on the whole that Lord Calne would stop asking questions and open the lunch-basket. But Lord Calne was tactlessly persistent.

"How would you like to be a diplomat?" he demanded.

Norton blushed. What was a diplomat? He had never heard of such a profession.

"I think," he plunged, "I should like that very much."

Lord Calne seemed pleased. "Yes, it's a good life. You see the world. You always have interesting work to do. You meet kings and all sorts. . . . For a young man like you, with a silver spoon in your mouth, it would be just the thing. Do you know any French?"

Mama had taught him some French, it appeared.

"Any German? Italian? Spanish?"

But no—none of these had been in the curriculum at Stone. Norton gazed mutely at the hedgerow,

unhappily alive for the first time to the linguistic deficiencies of his home.

Lord Calne glanced at him keenly. These boys, these younger sons of the great aristocratic houses, they ought to be trained to the public service from their cradles. They inherited the necessary personality, the poise, the breeding—all that came naturally. But it was nearly always spoiled for want of training. They drifted into the Army or the Church—careers which Lord Calne, as a diplomat, despised—or just hung about town making damned fools of themselves. People said that rank got a man anywhere. That was nonsense—arrant nonsense. The truth was that rank got a man placed without difficulty on the lowest rungs of the ladder. After that, if it wasn't in him to climb the rest, he was always outstripped by competitors with nothing but their brains to speak for them.

He became conscious of a sinking feeling in his stomach.

"What about a sandwich?" he suggested.

Norton woke from a day-dream in which he and Susan were playing a new game, to be called "Diplomats"

"Thank you, sir," he said.

They munched their sandwiches contentedly, and presently Lord Calne produced some buns.

"You know, young man——" he began, after a prodigious swallow.

Norton looked up, faintly alarmed. Surely he wasn't going to begin that disagreeable catechism again!

Lord Calne took another bite of bun.

"You know," he said, when this was disposed of, "I have an idea that you're the sort of young man who must be worked hard. If you aren't, you'll fail. Some boys can get on without drudgery. Most of us

can't. I couldn't." Another bite, a dozen pensive chews, another swallow. "And I should say you wouldn't be able to. It isn't enough to be popular with the rest, good at playing tennis and all that kind of thing. It simply isn't enough!"

He dived into the basket, produced a couple of ripe pears, and tossed one over to Norton. Examining the remaining pear with a connoisseur's eye,

"Drudgery!" he observed to it severely. "Drudgery!"

There was a formidable squelch as his fine teeth closed over the fruit. . . .

They spent the night at an inn on the road and got to Hammersmith the following afternoon.

Passing through London was a terrific experience. Bath, hitherto the last word in bustle and population and vastness, vanished into the background. Every now and then Lord Calne would say, "The Prussian Ambassador lives there", or "That's the way to the House of Commons—where you'll go one day." And once he stopped the carriage to speak to a foreign-looking gentleman strolling along a busy street which had the extremely odd name of Piccadilly. They talked in French—that much Norton could tell from a stray word here and there. Both spoke very rapidly, and the foreign gentleman had a funny way of waggling his hand at Lord Calne. Norton began to feel embarrassed, and looked cautiously round to see whether they might not be attracting the attention of passers-by. But nobody seemed to be taking any notice, and presently the foreign gentleman, sweeping his hat nearly to the ground, continued his stroll along the pavement. . . .

Hammersmith proved to be a sort of country town, full of big houses among lawns and trees. There was

a river there too, the biggest Norton had ever seen. He was moved to ask its name.

"Why, bless the boy!" Lord Calne seemed comically dismayed at the ignorance of his *protégé*. "That's the *Thames*!"

Norton thanked him, a little coldly. He wouldn't have turned on Lord Calne like that, if Lord Calne had been asking him the name of the stream in the park at Stone. How was he to know the Thames ran through Hammersmith?

"Here we are," Lord Calne announced abruptly.

They stopped outside the gate of a house overlooking the river, and walked up past some sloping lawns to the front door, where Lord Calne rang the bell.

§ v

The life of the Marchioness of Stone was bounded on the north by her husband, and on the south by her children. In the manner of her kind, she went periodically to live in London; and while there, she gave dinners, went to plays and to the opera and generally assisted at all the social detail which was part and parcel of her husband's position in the world. But London was not really to her taste, and when there she invariably referred to it slightly as "this town", with a peculiar inflection that left no doubt as to her sentiments. It was, for example, a wicked place. Someone was always liable to begin telling her salacious anecdotes, and she didn't like such things. One day, her husband's second wife's mother, the Dowager Duchess, had been driving with her in the Park, and they had passed Lord Mauldeth, with the little Mauldeth children. The Dowager Duchess had said, quite loudly, her genial bad old face

twisted in a sardonic smile: "I like to see Mauldeth with those children. He seems as fond of them as if they were his own!"

For politeness' sake, Lady Stone had smiled too. But afterwards, at home, she had felt ashamed of herself for smiling. She did not know the Mauldeths, though the town house of the Stones was nearly opposite Mauldeth House, in Whitehall. They were fashionables, Opposition people, and—Lady Mauldeth particularly—friendly with all that loose-living set of the young Duchess of Belgravia's.

She devoutly hoped no child of hers would ever get into that set.

This thought recurred to her as she drove back from Hammersmith one afternoon towards the end of the season two or three years after Norton had gone to Doctor Pulteney's Academy. When she was in town, she always went over to see him once a week, with a small cargo of apples, plums and other comestibles to sustain him under the burden of his studies. Doctor Pulteney had never made any objection to this. It was, for one thing, an excellent advertisement for his school, to have a Marchioness drive up to his door once a week; and he saw to it that the parents of the other boys were not left in ignorance of the circumstance. Each time Lady Stone called, she was received with royal ceremony in his private room, a servant ran hot-foot to Norton's class, and the usher in charge would announce with an apparent casualness that deceived nobody:

"Lord Norton, go to Doctor Pulteney's room at once, please. The Marchioness wishes to see you."

It was a ritual as invariable as the Morning Service in the Prayer-Book. Some of the boys were duly

awed. Others were unduly irreverent—among these young Rookwith, a lord himself (in his own right, too, not just by courtesy). But Rookwith, of course, mocked at everything and everybody. It was he, for example, who perpetrated that joke about the cat. One day during lessons, the class-room door being slightly ajar, Mrs. Pulteney's cat strolled in and started to wash her chest under the blackboard. Somebody in the class was heard to remark aloud with an elaborate pomposity: "Lawd Nawton, the Marchioness to see you!"

There had been a row about it, and finally Rookwith owned to the offending voice. In view of his rank, he only got a reprimand from the master, but Norton found him behind the shrubbery that evening and fought him. Norton won easily. For one thing, Rookwith's strength at that period of his life lay elsewhere than in his muscles, and he had more sense than to take a minute's punishment in excess of what was necessary to satisfy the outraged honour of his opponent.

Next morning he went up to Norton after class.

"I say, Fitzwarren," he began, "I want to make it plain that I didn't mean anything against your mother personally yesterday. About that cat, I mean."

Norton listened in silence.

"But I wish you'd take that haughty disdainful smile off your face," Rookwith went on, mimicking Norton's expression. "You're not a bad sort, but you encourage these lick-spittles here too much."

Norton was carving a twig. "I never thought about it that way," he replied, indifferently.

He wasn't annoyed with Rookwith. One fought a

man for insulting one's mother, but not necessarily for criticising oneself.

"Well, think about it that way now," Rookwith retorted.

The incident had the effect of bringing about a certain friendship between the two. They had, they found, at least one thing in common besides their rank. They were both lazy. But there was this difference between their laziness—that Rookwith was clever enough to indulge his failing without detriment to his studies; and Norton wasn't. Doctor Pulteney, however, being humanly fallible, desired to keep his aristocratic pupils as long as possible, and when the Marchioness called at Hammersmith, she invariably received good accounts of her son—not too glowing, but artistically shaded and sufficiently true to life to convince her.

The Doctor guided the school with a loose rein. Special permits had to be obtained by boys whose half-holiday engagements took them afar off, but with this restriction, provided they ran no risk of drowning themselves in the river, or of getting run over in King Street, they were allowed a large measure of freedom. In every direction lay fields, market gardens, nurseries with English elm and oak breaking the suburban monotony. It wasn't perhaps a very exciting landscape, but there were worse ways of spending a Saturday afternoon than walking with Rookwith over the fields to Shepherd's Bush or out towards Turnham Green. And on the whole, Norton found life pleasantly uncomplicated. If he worked hard, he was praised. If he didn't, he wasn't particularly blamed. So the years passed. . . . A little Latin, a little Greek he managed to acquire—and, truth to tell, not much else,

so far as learning was concerned. When he went home to Stone for the holidays, he always found that Susan, without in the least being compelled to do so, had more than kept pace with him. She was naturally clever, and had practically taught herself the two dead languages which at that time constituted the chief academic equipment of the living.

"I wish I could go away to boarding-school," she complained to Norton once.

They were walking up through the beechwoods at Longstone, under the peculiarly lovely translucent green that only beech leaves seem to possess.

"Why couldn't you," said Norton, "if you want to?"

"Mother doesn't like it."

"Oh, I see." Norton's tone of finality expressed precisely the character of Lady Stone's rule over her children. "What about the others?" he added. "Do they want to go to school too?"

"Gus and Charlotte?" Susan shook her head. "No—they're afraid they might have to work at school."

Norton mentally surveyed the tenor of his own scholastic life. "Not much fear of that, I should think," he admitted candidly.

The bland confession puzzled and shocked his sister a little.

"Don't you *want* to learn?" she asked him.

"Plenty of time," he hedged.

She was silent. If only she had been born a boy!

"You ought not to talk like that, Norton," she said at length. "You're fifteen. There isn't plenty of time. . . ."

Susan was a sore trial to the mature and rather flustered lady who acted as governess to the three Fitzwarren daughters. Augusta and Charlotte were

amiable girls, nice girls. Indeed Charlotte, in addition to her merely lady-like virtues, had a gift for piety which made her a real pleasure to govern. When Charlotte made spelling mistakes—an occurrence which took place at about every tenth word—the governess was wont to content herself with the mildest of corrections, for she knew that Charlotte was made that way, and that, moreover, she prayed to God every night to improve her spelling. Somehow or other, God never did this for Charlotte, but that did not matter so much. The principle was the thing.

Yes, Charlotte and Augusta were undoubtedly delightful girls, but Susan—— One day, the governess found Susan in the library reading a book she had got down from a high shelf. It was a Latin comedy, by Terence. Now the governess had never read Terence. Indeed she could not. But in her young, blue-stockings days there had been much talk of classic writers among the intellectual ladies she frequented, and she had gathered that the works of Terence were such as no young girl could read and remain pure.

"Can you understand it, Susan?" she enquired, whitelipped.

"Oh, yes, most of it. Some of it is rather colloquial, of course." (Little prig, thought the governess). "It's all about a young man who changes clothes with a eunuch."

"Susan!"

The governess, Terence in hand, marched off to Lady Stone and delivered her ultimatum. Unless Susan were forbidden the library, or the library purged of its Terences, she could not undertake to remain at Stone. . . . Lady Stone had a good talk to Susan afterwards. She explained gently and specifically to

her youngest daughter that learning was for men; that "we women have no concern with the classic writers", who were most of them coarse and immoral people; and that finally Susan, at her age, ought not to have known what eunuchs were, much less have read plays about them.

It was all rather crushing for poor Susan. The world, it seemed, was made for the Charlottes, not for her sort.

"I suppose I shall marry early," she told Norton, under the beeches, "and leave home."

"Marry?" Norton was alarmed. He had long ago grown out of his childish conception of passing his maturity with Susan in the game-keeper's cottage, playing "Diplomats". But she was still the repository of most of his confidences. He saved up little things to tell her—things impossible to recount to Mama or Papa. A Susan married, belonging to a stranger, living in a strange house, was a disturbing idea.

"Why marry?" he asked.

"To do what I like, read what I please—all that sort of thing."

"What about your husband?"

"I should have it all out with him beforehand."

"H'm." Norton pondered. "I wouldn't marry a girl who only married me to get away from somewhere else," he asserted at length with unaccustomed vehemence.

Susan looked at him and stopped to lean against a tree trunk as they climbed the rise to Longstone Farm. He was a big boy for his age, she thought, and would be very handsome. Those fine eyes. . . .

"What would you have her marry you for then? Love?"

Her voice was mocking. Norton began to blush.

"Oh, shut up!" he said, and began to walk on.

She watched him for a few moments, while her mind followed the trail of her thought. Then, having reached the end of this, "Wait a minute, Norton," she called out. "I've got a flint in my shoe."

He paused near the top of the rise. The sun, pouring through a break in the beech-leaves, covered his figure with golden light. . . .

Lady Stone, later, saw them walking slowly back over the park, apparently deep in conversation, Norton's arm resting lightly on Susan's narrow shoulders. The tears filled her eyes at the touching spectacle—until an insidious evil spirit reminded her of Terence and the eunuch. Was Susan really the best companion for Norton? An awful thought—her own girl—but Susan was queer. A cool, self-contained nature. That was what made that outburst of hers in the powdering-room so extraordinary, when Norton had gone away to school for the first time. She had never been a crying sort of girl.

Oh well, she supposed the two were like one another. Like one another and unlike herself. . . . That was a bitter pill—so far as Norton was concerned. Still, she was prepared to swallow it. For a long while now she had suspected a vein of hardness in Norton. Under his apparently yielding, feminine personality, something selfish, something of indifference and callousness was growing. He had always been a peaceable baby and a good little boy. The periods of anarchic troublesomeness through which most children pass seemed not to have touched him. A good boy—but quiet, secretive, living an inner life. If only he had been just a little more foolish and boisterous. She had

hoped and hoped that he would be like her, until she had almost convinced herself that he was. Now, by degrees, it came to her that he was not. All her life had been unselfishness. She hardly remembered doing a single thing for her own personal gratification. There was always her husband or one of the children—always the immovable, beloved north and south boundaries. That had been her life.

And she knew that Norton was not developing on these lines. He loved her—yes, that was another matter. But he was not like her. Lord Calne had been spending a few days at Stone in the spring and she had cautiously sounded him about Norton.

Lord Calne had smiled. "A fine boy," he said, adding pensively, "Quite—quite a *reigning prince* manner about him, isn't there?"

This morning, watching the two children walking across the park, Lord Calne's phrase entered her mind. She considered it critically. Norton's way of holding himself, that powerful air of conquest, his slow, deliberate way of speaking that she knew so well—"quite a *reigning prince* manner about him."

Yes, his person, in a few years, would be—magnificent. Nothing less. Better than ever his father's had been, even in the Marquis' splendid prime, when she had met him first.

But Norton's mind? Norton's soul?

The door of her room was circumspectly opened a few inches. It was Charlotte, with a book in her hand.

"Can I come in, Mama darling?"

Her second daughter, the prettiest of the three, with big, soulful eyes that just missed being like Norton's, sat down beside her.

"The volume of sermons I wrote for has just come, Mama. I wondered if I might read one to you before you go out. . . ."

§ VI

So Charlotte read aloud from the book of sermons, and her mother worked at some fancy stitching by the window, sometimes listening to Charlotte's monotonous voice, more often letting the sing-song drift over her and out on to the quiet air. Charlotte did not read very intelligently nor, Lady Stone thought, was the sermon a particularly sound one. More than once, in the fragments that reached her, she seemed to detect a trace of heterodoxy, a scent of the beast. And after her family, she cherished the inviolable sanctities of her religion more than anything in the world. Charlotte, of course, would not notice. A sermon was a sermon to her—a piece of writing about God, the reading of which gave you a pleasant sense of pious superiority, never aired in public, certainly, but none the less an oasis of comfort on the days when, for example, Susan was rude and unsisterly and made obscurely satirical comments which Charlotte did not understand.

Her family of daughters, Lady Stone reflected, was much like other people's families of daughters. In her maiden days she had seen the same thing in all sorts of houses—the same jealousies and petty incompatibilities. She had thought her own daughters would be different. And, amazingly, they hadn't been. Yet she wouldn't have liked three similar nonentities, three Augustas. Nor, on the whole, did they worry her much. With all their silly disagreements, she was fond of them. They would marry soon, too, and go away, and later on she,

too, would go and drift around among them in their new homes from one to the other, so many months with each—when the time came for her to leave Stone.

To leave Stone! It was a weight tied around her heart—this knowledge that soon or late she would have to leave the place where, after all, she had been so very happy—a weight that grew heavier as the time approached. One black day the Marquis would die, and Goward would be Marquis. There would be a new Marchioness at Stone, and she, the Dowager, would be cast forth, to wander in the desert of old people whom nobody very much wants. She would be comfortably off—no question of that. And she would have old friends to talk to, her son and daughters to visit. But loneliness—loneliness isn't dependent upon those things. Loneliness is a disease of the soul, and when it comes to old people it is generally fatal. Little children and animals can temper it, but it always wins in the end.

She felt that her eyes were wet. . . . Foolish of her to give way to such morbid thoughts. She ought to have more sense, a woman of her age, and with her breeding. And, besides, there was always Norton. Norton would grow up and make a name in the world, and she would keep his house for him. They would have a good town house, overlooking one of the parks, perhaps, with windows where she could sit and work and talk to her friends, and watch the birds and the trees and the people. . . .

Outside, the sun glinted and shimmered on the ornamental lake, on the silken ribbon of the stream that ran through the grounds, on the scythe of a distant gardener cutting some long grass.

Stone. . . .

CHAPTER II

FIRST LOVE

§ I

WHEN, under the beeches of Longstone Wood, Susan shot at her brother that awkward question about marrying, Norton had blushed. The truth was that he had begun to think about love—in fact, since an immortal date some six weeks before the end of the previous term, he himself had been in love. Quite hopelessly, seriously so.

There are those who deny that boys and girls fall in love. They may be right about girls, though I doubt it. But it is quite beyond question that, at fifteen, Norton had fallen deeply in love with Joan Stathern, who attended the Misses Twistleton's seminary at The Poplars, Hammersmith. The Misses Twistleton came of good stock. Their blood was blue, or, at least, bluish. They let it be known that their school was not an ordinary school, not a vulgar profit-making concern at all, but simply the expression of the Misses Twistleton's constitutional need for some more active interest in life than the paying and receiving of calls. Nevertheless, their charges were considerable and their girls were supposed to represent the *élite* of the country's well-born virginity.

Every Sunday morning during the school term the girls from the -Poplars and the boys from Doctor Pulteney's School attended service at the Parish Church. The boys sat on the extreme right of the church, the girls on the extreme left, separated by a

broad central block of mere local adults. For years Norton had seen the Poplars girls with an eye of contemptuous indifference. They were just girls—gigglers, players with dolls and sewers of samplers—creatures like Augusta and Charlotte. When he thought or spoke of them, it was with the derision which people of all ages accord to what they do not understand.

But the teens are a strange time, a transition never entirely smooth. Odd things happen in the teens. It seemed, for example, excessively odd to Norton when first his eye caught that of the quite ordinary, sturdily built girl at the end of the second pew from the back, and the girl looked at him, and he at her, for a whole minute, before the spell broke.

She was clearly a new girl at Twistletons'. He knew the faces of all the girls who came to the church, just as he knew the brasses on the wall, the confused incidents depicted in the stained glass windows, the prosperous figures in the central pews. The girls' faces were a part of the normal furniture of the place. But this new face—this was something other than furniture, something that had a definite meaning personal to himself.

Not, of course, that he really docketed and identified his feeling so precisely as this. The recognition of what had happened to him chiefly took the form of a violent desire to stare at the second pew from the back, across the Church. And he did stare—outrageously, beyond what was permitted by the most elementary good manners. But the girl did not look at him again.

The morning service reached its appointed pre-destinate end. The congregation broke up. The Poplars girls filed out. Last of all, Doctor Pulteney's boys—with the immemorial clatter of boys—emerged

into the green-and-gold sunshine of the churchyard. Norton glanced discreetly around. . . . There, at the gate, the tail of Twistletons' crocodile was disappearing into the street. So that finished things for one week.

He walked back thoughtfully, rehearsing gallant scenes in his mind.

Next morning, as he dressed, he remembered that the Poplars girls went for walks. Not, indeed, solitary walks. A Poplars girl separated from the crocodile was a phenomenon which, quite properly, nobody in Hammersmith had ever seen. Still, they did go for walks, and their walks—carefully guarded affairs presided over by a henchwoman of the Misses Twistleton's—not infrequently led them along the Upper Mall, under the great oaks beside the river, and, incidentally, past the gate of Doctor Pulteney's school.

For a week, at the hours when he knew from experience that the Poplars girls were likely to be abroad, Norton haunted the lawn in front of the School—sometimes with a book to justify his loafing there; occasionally in the company of Rookwith; often simply dreaming alone, with no effort at disguise. And at length he was rewarded.

Rookwith was with him that day. Afternoon school was over. They lay on the sloping grass, and Rookwith—a precocious, discursive reader—perused a volume the outside of which announced itself as *Bower's History of the Popes*, while the inside (on inspection detachable) surprisingly consisted of a novel entitled *The Champion of Virtue*. Norton nibbled grasses, kept an eye on the road, and, presumably, meditated.

The oak trees rustled; a man bawled to his mate on a barge floating downstream; from a distance came the subdued clatter of feet and the sound of young female

voices. The grass that had been oscillating between Norton's lips suddenly became rigid. An alertness passed into the well-bred indifference of his features, and he hurriedly assumed what endeavoured to be a dignified and arresting attitude.

They passed, chirruping like birds. Towards the end of the crocodile, walking with a fat, round-faced girl, was the *fons et origo* of his mental disturbances, the unknown of last Sunday's experience in the church. He held his breath and looked. A week's dreaming, he found, had destroyed the real image in his mind. Still, there she was, recognizable, more wonderful than his dream. As she approached, he saw—or thought he saw—that she glanced at him and turned to say something to the round-faced girl. They both giggled. Then, their blank and maidenly faces clearly covering some ill-suppressed joke, they passed Doctor Pulteney's gate.

The chirruping faded out, the clatter of footsteps merged into the rustle of the oak-leaves. Norton heaved a deep sigh and looked disparagingly at Rookwith.

"Did you notice that girl?" he enquired casually.

Rookwith frowned. "Girl?"

"One of Twistletons'—a new one."

"Well, what about her?"

"What about her?" Norton was filled with a large and patronising indignation. "If you'd seen her——"

"Well, I didn't."

There was a pregnant pause, at the end of which Rookwith shut his book with a yawn.

"What's the matter with you?" he demanded.

Norton preserved a melancholy silence.

"Some girl at Twistletons', is it? Now I think of it, I did hear a babbling in the distance. . . . Well,

what is she like?" Without waiting for an answer, "I was expecting you would get taken that way before long. Let me see, how old are you?"

"Nearly sixteen."

"Just fifteen," amended Rookwith, who was slightly older. "Well, you take my advice. I've been through all you're going through, and I know. I didn't tell you, but the term before last, I was simply bowled over by that girl in the grocer's shop at Shepherd's Bush."

Norton stirred restively.

"I wore my shoes out tramping over to see her," Rookwith expanded, the recollections of past glories falling thick upon him. "But now—would you believe it?—I've forgotten what she looks like. I wouldn't walk ten yards to look at her. . . . Girls are all alike, you know—every one of them. About as different as turnips in a field. You'll get over this." He paused, as his mind took a new line. "But as for those Twistleton creatures," he announced wisely, "you've got about as much chance of kissing one of them as you have of——"

He sought for a striking parallel and eventually found one to his taste.

Norton shrugged.

"Filthy brute, you are, Rookwith!" he remarked.

Getting up, he brushed the bits of dried grass from his clothes and proceeded pensively to kick Rookwith's novel across the lawn. . . .

He wished he had not mentioned his trouble to Rookwith, who clearly did not understand. Indeed, if Rookwith had stopped at mere lack of comprehension, it would not have been so bad. But Rookwith possessed a mordant humour, which he indulged freely. Several days later, in class, Norton received a

note in a disguised handwriting which, however, he had no difficulty in identifying:

"TO LORD NORTON FITZWARREN,

"Be at the tryst to-night, at moonrise. But Beware! You are watched.

"Yours truly,

"THE FAIR UNKNOWN."

Norton crumpled the paper viciously into a small pellet and aimed it at Rookwith, but unfortunately the annoyance behind it sent the missile well past Rookwith and over two rows of forms to the feet of the usher, who picked it up, straightened it out, read it and continued with the lesson.

That afternoon Doctor Pulteney sent for Norton. The crumpled note lay on Doctor Pulteney's table. The Doctor himself, a large benevolent-looking man who was secretly bored by his school and hankered after the easier existence of a good living in a country parish, glanced up inscrutably at his pupil's entrance and then down again to the paper on the table.

"Who wrote this, Lord Norton?" he enquired at last flourishing the incriminating note.

"I don't know, sir," Norton lied.

"Come now, come now!"

But Norton declined to come. "I found it on my desk, sir."

"I see. You—*found* it?"

"Yes, sir."

"Very well." The Doctor tore the paper to shreds, a trifle ostentatiously. "We'll say no more about it. But you understand, of course, that I can't have boys at my school receiving notes from young women outside."

"Yes, sir. It wasn't from a young woman, sir."

"I see. Whom was it from?"

"I don't know, sir."

"H'm. You don't seem to know very much, Lord Norton."

Norton let that pass.

"It's a joke, sir," he volunteered at length, not defending himself, but with an air of explaining away the Doctor's difficulties for him.

"A joke? Ah yes—a joke of a peculiar kind, perhaps." Doctor Pulteney stood up and came over to Norton. "You're a big boy, Fitzwarren," he said gently, "and your father is a rich man. I think you're old enough to know what I mean. Well, take care. . . . Now be off with you."

When Norton had gone Doctor Pulteney sauntered over to his window and gazed thoughtfully out. He had spoken plainly—too plainly, some would have said. But he had no illusions about boys, and no hypocrisies. He had seen too much of their private lives for that. . . . A joke, that note? Yes, probably it was. The writing looked suspiciously like that young devil Rookwith's, disguised. But the way the joke pointed? That was another matter. Fitzwarren had been loafing about by the gate too much lately. . . . Anything like a scandal must be crushed at birth. Scandal ruined a school sooner than anything. And he hoped to sell the place in due course for a cosy sum. . . . He crossed back to his table, took out from a drawer the school register, and turned to the F's. Farrell, Fenter—Fitzwarren. H'm—fifteen years and two months. Very young, of course, for anything serious. In another boy, he would have pool-pooled the idea. But Fitzwarren was a type that matured

early. The fifteen of that sort was as much as the ordinary boy's seventeen. Well, he must be watched!

The affair occasioned a temporary breach between Norton and Rookwith. During the five weeks that remained before the end of the term, Norton kept himself to himself, nursing an ideal and a resentment—an ideal of female perfection, and a resentment against masculine dirty-mindedness. He didn't mind Rookwith. Rookwith was a sewer that one took for granted. But old Pulteney's nasty remarks had been a surprise. "Take care," old Pulteney had said. Take care, indeed!

Good God!

He avoided the sloping piece of lawn by the gate. And he tried manfully to avoid also the spectacle of the Poplars girls in church, fixing his eyes intently on the roof, the choir stalls, the vicar—anywhere but on the opposite pews. Sometimes indeed he gave way. But every time he looked at the second pew from the back, across the church, he seemed to see Rookwith's wink, genial and obscene, commenting upon this trifling incident of a worldly world. And, in any case, it was useless. *She* was always looking away from him.

Then, on the last Sunday before the holidays, while the vicar read the second lesson, and Norton was considering various plans for the ensuing weeks at Stone, he became conscious that he was being gazed at, and involuntarily turned—in the intuitive way one does—towards the direction from which the gaze seemed to come.

Joan Stathern—he didn't of course know her name then—was looking straight at him, grave-eyed, serious, in a way that filled his heart with a splendid, singing exultation. It seemed to him that they two were alone in the church, alone, and near each other. A sweet-

ness, a sense of conquest, a vision of a new world swept over him.

She looked away again. The moment was over. The vicar, in tones of gentlemanly boredom, announced the close of the lesson.

Three days later Norton set out for Stone.

§ II

The holidays passed, very similar in atmosphere and incident to all their predecessors. In two respects, however, this holiday was perceptibly a little different from the others. The first difference was that Susan no longer held the peculiar, unquestioned place in life which she had hitherto occupied; and the second, that as the weeks went by Norton was aware of a quite definite desire to return to school. Both novel sensations, which intermittently disturbed him. . . .

On his way back to Hammersmith he spent a night at Goward's house in town. About a year previously Goward had married, his choice falling on a young peeress in her own right, the Countess Surlingham. It was an excellent match, as a gratifying consequence of which Goward now signed his letters *Goward Surlingham*. There were, indeed, any number of motives for Goward's choosing this particular young woman, for she had money and charm as well as rank. Why, on the other hand, the Countess had allowed herself to be chosen by Goward was a more mysterious matter, the reasons for which occasioned sundry dowagers a good deal of mental exercise. Anyhow, she had done so, and, quite properly, had just borne Goward's son and heir. The happy event had taken place only ten days before Norton's return to school, and she was still in bed when he arrived from Stone. After dinner

and a wash, Norton was invited to pay his respects to her in her bedroom. He thought how nice she looked among the pillows, and wondered what she could have found to like in old Goward. The encounter made an impression upon him—primarily, perhaps, because it was the first time he had ever seen a pretty woman in bed.

The interview over, he was descending the stairs when he heard voices in the hall—Goward's, rather high-pitched and long-winded; an elderly, military voice; and what seemed to be a female of some sort. A dead bore—he didn't want to talk pretty, after a long journey. But perhaps he would be let off. He overcame a shameful impulse to slink into a convenient box-room that led off the landing.

"Just ran in for a minute to see how Elizabeth and the baby were," the military voice was announcing. "Joan here wanted to see the future Earl Surlingham."

Then Goward's pedagogue laugh: "The future Marquis of Stone, you mean. . . . I'll enquire if Elizabeth feels well enough, Sir Robert. You will understand that in such a weak state, a great deal of company——"

"Oh yes, bless me, yes," the military voice cut in, nipping Goward in the bud. "Bless me, yes, yes, yes, yes, yes," it added, as though to stop Goward from beginning again. "Had brats of my own. Joan here, for one."

"So you want to see the baby, Joan?" Goward said, turning on his hateful patronising from-grown-up-to-child tone.

"If I might," replied the female voice.

"I'll enquire then," Goward promised magnanimously. "Won't you go into the library and sit down?"

"Sorry. Can't stop a minute. Joan here has to get to Hammersmith to-night."

"Very well, Sir Robert. I'll see Elizabeth at once." Goward turned to ascend the stairs. "Ah, Norton—excellent! Would you mind going up to the Countess' room——?" He paused. "No, perhaps I had better go. You stay and talk to Sir Robert Stathern, Norton. . . . This is my brother Norton, Sir Robert. Norton, Sir Robert Stathern—Miss Joan Stathern."

Goward thereupon disappeared, leaving Norton to do the best he could.

Sir Robert Stathern put out a formidable hand and said: "How d'ye do, Lord Norton?"

Miss Joan Stathern also put forth a hand and smiled but said nothing.

Norton informed Sir Robert that he did very well, and smiled back speechlessly at Joan. It was an heroic smile, dragged desperately up from the bottomless pit of shyness within him. If only he had slipped into the box-room! If only that fool Goward hadn't left him like this!

"Going back to school, Lord Norton?" Sir Robert enquired conversationally.

"Yes, sir."

"Eton, I suppose?"

Surprisingly, the girl interjected: "No, Daddy—Hammersmith."

Sir Robert, a copper-coloured colonial-looking person with a fierce eye, glanced uncertainly from one young face to the other. Norton coloured wildly.

"What d'you mean, girl? What's the matter? What's the matter, hey?"

"Nothing, Daddy." Mercifully, Norton felt, she was going to do the explaining. "It's quite simple. I've

seen Lord Norton among Doctor Pulteney's boys in church at Hammersmith. Only I didn't know who it was till now."

"Oh, I see." And Sir Robert repeated that he saw, he saw, he saw in tones of gradually increasing conviction.

Footsteps descended the stairs—Goward again. "You may come up for a moment, Joan," he intimated. "Just a moment. . . . Will you come too, Sir Robert?"

"Thank ye, no. Seen enough brats in my time. . . . Give my love to Elizabeth. Tell her I'll call again when she's about."

Norton was left alone with Sir Robert. He knew that in such circumstances it is better to say anything, however platitudinous, than to remain silent; he felt that he was acting like a booby before *her* father; nevertheless not one word could he call upon from that cursed abyss of shyness.

Sir Robert coughed and said:

"What do you think of doing when you leave school?"

(Why the devil did all grown-ups begin like that? As though boys thought of nothing but what they were going to do when they had stopped being boys!)

Recklessly, he replied: "Diplomacy, sir."

"Ah!" Sir Robert nodded sagely. "Good thing for a younger son. Good thing. Very good thing." He became expansive. "Now I'm a colonial Governor. Just back from the Indies. Never be a colonial Governor, Lord Norton. You sour your temper and ruin your digestion and live like a heathen—all for what? For a pittance. And you're out of sight out of mind, too. There you are, a thousand miles away, keeping a lot of damned niggers in order—and if there are any

good things going at home, you don't get 'em. You—don't—get 'em!”

Norton tried to look intelligent and sympathetic, as though the trials of colonial Governors lay very near his heart.

“Are you home for good now, sir?” he enquired.

“Home for good! Bless me, no. Once a Governor, always a Governor. No places for men like me at home. Still, I shall be here for six months or more, I suppose.”

Norton gathered that Sir Robert had come to England some time ago to make a home for his wife and children. “These foreign climates—no good to women. . . . And there were the brats to be sent to school somewhere. No schools in the colonies.” He glanced upwards. “Hurry along there, Joan!”

Norton realised that Joan was coming downstairs, followed by Goward, and that Sir Robert was shaking him by the hand again.

“Come in and see us when you have a day's holiday,” he was saying, with choleric geniality. “Number Ten Storey's Gate—don't forget!”

Norton thanked him in a rather bewildered fashion. A moment later he was holding Joan Stathern's hand again. She hardly seemed to notice him.

“It's a *beautiful* baby,” she was saying to Goward.

Norton was conscious of a rebuff. Or was she just playing with him? Girls, he had heard, did that. . . .

As Goward returned from seeing his visitors to their carriage, he put a heavy avuncular palm on Norton's shoulder and led him into the library.

“*Now* we can have a good talk,” he confided.

That was the last thing Norton wanted, but an ancient habit of subservience to Goward kept him from explaining this in so many words.

"Those Statherns——" Goward opened cautiously. "Have you met them before?"

Norton said he hadn't. Impossible to tell Goward about those long, grave glances across the church.

"Well, I wondered. I heard Sir Robert inviting you to call there. . . . I'm not sure that I should, Norton. They're relations of the Countess, of course—very, very distant. But Sir Robert is a peculiar man. And they're quite poor—oh, regular church mice. . . ."

Church mice. . . . Norton's mind jumped a cog. Next Sunday he would see Joan—in church.

It occurred to him then as something surprising that, except for a formal good-bye, he had not yet said one single word to her. . . .

§ III

To relate in all its circumstantial detail the rise and the decline of a love-affair, especially between such very young people, would certainly be tedious. These businesses are born in our lives, at one time or another; they exercise over us, while they last, a despotic rule—kingdom, power and glory—to which no other influence is in the least degree comparable. Finally, they vanish—suddenly, with trumpets, or imperceptibly, in a whisper. It matters little which way, once the thing is done.

To Norton the term that followed the meeting at Goward's was a time of anxieties, of hopes and dreads, exquisite stolen moments, bitter uncertainties, maddening fancied slights; a time of subterfuge, when he connived at forging Goward's signature; a transition, out of which he emerged at last into the full summer of his adolescence.

It was hushed up, that matter of Goward's signature. Only one or two people ever knew about it. But it had

its importance as marking the end of an epoch, for on account of it Norton was taken away from Hammer-smith in a hurry, before the term was quite finished.

The thing arose in this way: Rookwith, ever sardonically on the look out for human frailty, chanced to intercept one of the friendly smiles with which, when the Misses Twistleton's henchwoman was looking the other way, Joan Stathern now filled the young heart of Norton with rapture and despair. At the moment he said nothing, but next day, finding Norton back at his old post on the sloping lawn, he mentioned the matter. They had for some weeks past resumed their old intimacy, and Rookwith spoke now not as the licensed jester, but in his *rôle* of the mature and world-worn man of affairs.

"It was too noticeable altogether," he warned Norton. "And so was your smile back at her. You'll both get into trouble."

Norton abstractedly wound a grass with increasing tightness round one finger, till the end went white; sighed; gazed at the river; but offered no intelligible comment.

"What you want to do," Rookwith continued seriously, "is to meet her. See her more often. That'll cure you quicker than anything."

Norton muttered: "I don't want to be cured, you fool," and, after reflection: "How the devil *can* I meet her?"

"At her home, of course. Don't her people live in town?"

"Yes, but I can't go there."

"Why not?"

"Can't get away. Old Pulteney won't give me a permit now without a letter signed by a relative."

Rookwith recognized the repercussion of that famous "Fair Unknown" note. Some *amende honorable* was plainly due from him. He wrinkled his brows.

"Do you know what days she goes to see her family?" he demanded at last.

"No."

"H'm. You aren't what I should call an enterprising lover."

"How am I to find out?"

"Well——" Rookwith considered. "You might get a message through to her."

"A message?"

"Yes, a note. I happen to know one of the maid-servants at Twistletons."

Norton frowned. His experience of notes was unfortunate. "Joan would never dare write," he objected.

"You might try."

"Besides, what would be the good, if I couldn't get to town at the same time as she did?"

"Write a letter to Pulteney in your father's name."

"Good God!"

"Your mother's then."

"No."

"Well, haven't you a brother or something?"

Norton thought of Goward. He had a letter in his pocket at that very moment, signed with the pre-tentious pontifical *Goward Surlingham*. Somehow it did not seem so disgraceful a thing to forge Goward's signature. Still, he replied shortly that he couldn't possibly do anything like that.

Rookwith shrugged. "As you like." He rose and began to walk towards the house. "Let me know if you change your mind," he called back. . . .

And, within twenty-four hours, against all that training and tradition could urge, Norton did change his mind. Thus it came to pass that Rookwith slipped out without permission that evening—a Friday—and returned later with the intelligence that he had seen the maidservant who was confident of her ability to deliver a note. By Saturday afternoon the note—after many painful amendments—was written. On Saturday evening Rookwith paid another visit to The Poplars, with equal success. All was going magnificently. Yet on Sunday morning at church Norton did not receive the smile he had come to look forward to so keenly. Joan Stathern, in fact, seemed perceptibly cross.

"You've made a mess of things again," he accused Rookwith.

Rookwith informed Norton briefly that he, Rookwith, *knew* women, and that the young lady's apparent displeasure was really a good sign. And sure enough, on the Monday evening, in defiance of all probability, Rookwith casually threw across at Norton a note containing winged words set down in a spidery feminine hand:

"DEAR LORD NORTON,

"You ought not to have written to me, but I am sure Daddy will be pleased to see you at Storey's Gate. I generally go to London to see them on Saturdays.

"JOAN STATHERN."

"Well?" Rookwith demanded.

Norton showed him the letter.

Rookwith grinned. "What did I say?" He pulled out from his coat pocket a sheet of paper and examined it critically, with his head on one side.

"Not bad, one or two of them," he observed, mysteriously.

Norton looked. The paper was covered with Goward Surlinghams of all sorts and conditions—some dashing, some meticulous, some merely steady, but one and all bearing a definite family resemblance to Goward's own signature.

"I don't like it," he said.

Rookwith affected dismay. "But now that we've gone so far——"

"Yes—but forgery!"

"Bless your young heart, I'll do all that part of it. I'll even go into town to post the letter for you."

"Oh, all right!" Norton, the weaker vessel, gave way again. "But there's going to be the devil to pay if it gets out. . . ."

Ultimately, indeed, there was the devil to pay. But for the moment, the affair went according to plan, with no payment of any sort. During that week, Doctor Pulteney stopped Norton in the corridor after morning school. He had had, it appeared, a letter from Norton's brother, Earl Goward.

"Your brother would like you to go to his house in town every Saturday, whenever possible," he explained. "As he says, you are getting older now, and it is time you began to meet more people."

(That bit had been Rookwith's master-stroke!)

"I can naturally have no objection," the Doctor added. "You will, of course, obtain the usual permits, and return each evening in good time. . . ."

Next Saturday afternoon, Norton knocked for the first time at the door of Sir Robert Stathern's house, to Storey's Gate.

§ IV

To the boy in his middle teens, normally brought up, the revelation of passionate love comes as a sacred mystery. Twenty is frankly carnal; eighteen and nineteen know what they want, or at least, what they think they want; but at fifteen or sixteen or seventeen there is a period when, for the first and perhaps the last time in his life, a boy thinks of a girl as something worth dying for. He passes through it, bothered, flurried, utterly unconscious of the dignity with which he is for the moment invested, intent merely on appearances, trifles, what impression he is making, whether or not he is cutting a foolish figure. It is only later, when he knows what women are made of; that, looking back, he can really assess his first love and, perhaps, remember its transcendent purity with regret.

To Norton, the first time of seeing Joan Stathern in the rather shabby Stathern home at Storey's Gate, of talking to her as she demonstrated to him the features of the tiny garden, of meeting the divinity face to face, in the ordinary circumstances of her life, with her faded mother, her young brothers—with an experience of this kind the delights of the most perfect honeymoon, prodigal of newly conquered worlds, are not to be compared. To be permitted to see a miniature of her as a tiny girl, to eat food with her, to listen to her accounts of existence at Twistletons': these were a Heaven for which he would have forged Goward's name a thousand times.

She told him her age—a year younger than himself; her birthday; all about life in the Indies; and one day, in the course of their decorous walk round and round the little garden, she explained how, when she was

older, she was going abroad again to keep house for her father.

"You'll be leaving England again then?" he said, vaguely troubled.

"Yes, of course."

"Oh!"

She had looked at him, in a curious way she had, with eager, expectant eyes, but he remained silent. They let the subject drop. Later on, however, it came to the surface again. She said, *à propos* of something she disapproved of, that it was "just like these English people".

"But you're English," he objected.

"Yes. I haven't lived here much, though. I don't really fit in very well. The girls at school think I'm funny in lots of ways."

"Funny?"

"Yes—don't look so shocked. I am funny. I should like to do all sorts of funny things when I grow older. At least I expect they would seem funny to you."

"What sort of things?"

"No. You would laugh."

"I wouldn't."

"Truly?"

"Word of honour."

She considered. "Well for one thing, I don't feel I want to do what other girls do—get married and go into society and all that."

"But—"

"No, don't interrupt. What I want to do is something quite different—to go somewhere among half-savage tribes, and build a great house there, and reign like a queen over them."

Norton lunged with his shoe at a piece of loose gravel. He was distressed.

"It does sound—funny," he admitted lamely.

"You don't like it?"

"Not very much."

"I suppose not. You would rather I stayed in this stuffy old England, I suppose, and got married and all the rest of it."

"Yes." He became suddenly vehement and articulate. "Really, I do want that, Joan. . . . because—I want you to marry *me*—when we're both grown-up, I mean? You will—won't you? I mean——"

He tailed off into an anxious wordlessness.

They had stopped in their walk around the little untidy garden. For a second he was afraid that she would make fun of him. But she didn't. She only looked at him silently, with the grave serenity of that first long glance in the church. At last——

"If you still want me to," she answered, "I will."

He was overjoyed.

"But of course I shall always want you to!"

"You think so now."

"I shall always want you to," he repeated.

From the direction of the house a door banged.

"Joan." He looked cautiously around. "Do you think——? Would you mind——?"

There and then, they kissed—such a chaste kiss, with heads bent forward, young bodies well apart, not even their hands touching. Still, a kiss—and the first. . . .

§ v

Then suddenly the fabric of their love-making was blown sky-high. A small error, inevitable perhaps, a loop-hole in Rookwith's scheme, brought the delicate structure

about their ears like a child's castle of blocks, which the slightest passing touch may send in ruins over the carpet.

Rookwith's plan had provided, it seemed at the time, for everything. Doctor Pulteney, for example, was bound to send a reply to the forged letter, and this reply, reaching Goward, would give the game away at once. But Rookwith exercised over the school servants a mysterious and potent authority. He knew that a certain manservant always took charge of whatever letters the Doctor might have for the post, and during several days he made it his business to see the destination of every letter that the Doctor wrote. On the third day, he was rewarded—there was a letter addressed to Earl Goward. By means known only to himself he deceived or suborned the manservant. The letter changed hands, and, shortly afterwards, went up in flame at the back of the shrubbery.

Moreover, it was on Rookwith's advice that Norton called every third Saturday at Goward's house. It was always possible, as Rookwith explained to Norton, that Sir Robert Stathern might meet Goward and mention the visits to Storey's Gate. But if Norton came fairly regularly to see Goward, and Sir Robert did not go into too many details, Goward would suppose that Norton had merely dropped in on the Statherms for a few minutes as he passed. It was, of course, always possible that Sir Robert *would* go into too many details, and in that case the murder would be out. That sort of accident, Rookwith made it clear, had to be faced. And Norton, by that time impervious to considerations of risk, faced it.

However, it wasn't that particular bomb that blew up Norton's idyll. The petard, it was true, was flung by Goward, but not in that precise way.

What happened was this:

It chanced that Goward and his wife, one morning, drove out in their carriage to pay a call on some friends who lived in Kensington. The friends were not at home and the carriage was accordingly turning back towards London again when Goward's wife said:

"Let's go on a little way."

Goward considered. "Go on, my dear? Where?"

"Anywhere. There's plenty of time."

"Very well, my dear." He told the coachman to drive on towards Hammersmith. "It certainly is a glorious morning," he added. "The air will do us good."

His wife regarded him ironically. She had long since found out that one of her husband's "little ways" took the form of a pedantic lust to possess a good reason for everything he did. Looking at him now she observed that his mind was pondering some fresh idea, and she waited for it to be delivered. At length it came.

"How would you like to call on Doctor Pulteney?" he demanded.

"Doctor Pulteney?" She frowned over the unfamiliar name.

"Norton's schoolmaster."

"Oh, yes, I remember." So that was what his benevolent and officious soul had been evolving. Oh, well, she didn't mind. She rather liked Norton—a pretty boy, who would be devastating before he was much older. "That would be delightful," she said. "We might fetch Norton back with us for the day."

But Goward wasn't certain of the propriety of this. It was really taking the matter too far. "We ought not to interrupt his studies," he explained. "And besides—it seems to me that he has quite enough holidays. You know he has come to see us several times this term."

I was rather surprised, I confess, at the freedom he was allowed, but he showed me Doctor Pulteney's written permit."

The Countess did not reply. She was trying to remember something, to put two and two together—two most annoyingly elusive twos, they were. What was it somebody had said to her recently about Norton . . . something about him and the Statherns?

Ah, yes, that was it, Amelia Hagnaby had met him at the Statherns' one Saturday afternoon. That bright little Stathern girl had been there—the one who had wanted to see Baby—What was her name?—Joan, of course, Joan Stathern!

The carriage rolled on towards Hammersmith, and Goward made judicious, improving observations upon the condition of the crops, the way London seemed to be spreading westward, and the excellence of the two horses—newly purchased by himself, after studying in several books on the subject the points for which one should watch when buying a horse. It must be added that they really were good horses. Whatever his faults, Goward's name had never yet been associated with a pig in a poke.

The Countess pursued her own thoughts. So at length they came to Upper Mall, under the great oak-trees beside the river, and drew up outside the gates of Doctor Pulteney's house.

§ VI

A quarter of an hour later, Norton was summoned to Doctor Pulteney's room.

The Doctor was seated in his magisterial chair. His fingers played nervously with a pen, and his smooth features were puckered with annoyance. Beyond him

by the window sat Goward and his wife—Goward with pursed lips and a long, solemn face, the Countess looking on amusedly, the detached spectator of the little comedy.

Norton said: "Yes, sir?" The infallible nose of the schoolboy for such things scented trouble, his heart sank, but he managed to greet Goward with a confident smile, adding warmly, as to a probable ally: "Hello, Countess." All the family (except Goward) called her Countess at that time.

Countess said: "You *naughty* boy, Norton," but her tone was not deeply serious. Norton noticed Goward half-glance at her sharply.

Doctor Pulteney sighed, coughed and turned wearily in his chair so as to face Norton.

"Lord Norton," he began, "we need your assistance—your—er—explanations. Doubtless these will be satisfactory."

"Yes, sir," Norton agreed not very hopefully.

"Exactly." The Doctor resumed his discourse. "Earl Goward has just called upon me to enquire as to your progress. In conversation I mentioned the letter his lordship had written to me at the beginning of the term, in which he asked that you should go to town to see him every Saturday. You may judge of my—er—astonishment when his lordship told me that he had never written such a letter."

Here the Countess interrupted: "Are you *sure*, Goward, that you didn't write that letter? You might have forgotten, you know."

Goward, who had so far said nothing, made a little scornful sound. "Forgotten? Me? My dear——"

"People often are absent-minded in that way," she urged.

"People may be. I am not."

(No, thought Norton, he's right there, damn him!)

"Well now!" Doctor Pulteney took up the thread.

"I happen to have kept that letter, also a copy of my reply to it. Earl Goward denies that the signature on the first is his, or that he ever received the second. . . . Now, Lord Norton, we want to know what you have to say to this."

That was largely what Norton wanted also. What to say—what tale to tell them—how not to get old Rookwith into the mess——

"Take your time, Norton," Goward remarked ironically.

Norton licked his lips and began: "Well, you see——"

His audience waited. A clock ticked with irritating persistence. Norton decided to lie straight ahead.

"I wrote that letter," he said.

There was a moment's silence. Then Goward leaned forward incredulously.

"You mean—you forged my signature?"

"Yes."

"But why?"

(Why? Why had he done it? To see Joan, of course!)

"I wanted to spend my Saturdays in town."

"What did you do there?"

"Just walked about."

Goward sniffed. "Just walked about, indeed!"

Countess, Norton noticed, was looking at him now with a quite definite air of speculative interest and amusement.

"Well now, Lord Norton!" The Doctor took a hand again. "Can you tell us why my letter failed to reach Earl Goward?"

"No, sir."

"A coincidence, I presume?"

"I don't know, sir."

"I see." He flung down the pen he had been fiddling with and turned to Goward. "Well, my lord, I must leave matters in your hands. I confess I am amazed—amazed——"

"Perhaps I might see Norton alone for a few minutes," Goward broke ruthlessly in upon the tale of the Doctor's amazement. "The Countess would like to look over the school, if you can spare the time."

The suggestion was gratefully received. Doctor Pulteney, good easy man, was more than content to escort the Countess on a tour of his little kingdom and to leave the scene of battle until the dust and thunder should have rolled away. As the door closed behind them, Goward turned upon Norton the fire of his wrath. Did he know what he had done? Was he aware that forgery was a criminal offence—a capital offence? And was he familiar with the punishment meted out to capital offenders? "Hanging, sir—hanging by the neck till the malefactor is dead!" What would the Marquis do? Whatever would Norton's poor mother say? How could the family ever lift up their heads again?

Norton stood his ground, saying nothing. He knew perfectly well that Goward wanted no replies to these questions. He would have liked to explain to Goward what an undignified ass he was making of himself, but he fought against the idea. Only once did he open his mouth—when Goward for the last time tried to pump out of him how he had spent the time in town.

"I know well enough how you spent it," Goward fumed. "Hanging round low pothouses, getting into bad company, learning to gamble!"

"I didn't!" Norton spat back.

"Well, how *did* you then?"

"I shan't tell you."

"Oh, indeed!"

"No, I shan't. If my father asks me, I shall tell him. But I shan't tell you."

"Very well. It will doubtless be found out, whether you tell or not."

He paused to clear his throat. "I shall write to your father to-night," he concluded. "I shall put all the facts before him. Meanwhile, you will remain with Doctor Pulteney, until we have decided what shall be done with you."

He waved a lean white hand. "You may return to your class now. . . ."

§ VII

Goward's thunderings came to nothing, or at least to nothing like the dire apocalypse their creator had threatened and hinted. Precisely what took place at Stone when the news of his disgrace reached there Norton never knew. But nobody ever came forward to prosecute him for forgery—not even Goward. And there seemed to be a tacit agreement in the family not to mention the matter. A week after Goward's invasion of Hammersmith, a curt message came from the Marquis. He had decided, it seemed, to send Norton at once to a private tutor's—a clergyman on the Lincolnshire coast. Norton was to make his arrangements immediately. An authority to draw on a firm in the city for his necessary expenses was enclosed.

That was all.

CHAPTER III

PASTORALE

§ I

NORTON'S removal to Lincolnshire was by no means the direct consequence of his London *faux pas*; nor was Nellesthorpe Rectory in any sense a place of exile or a means of punishment. For some time it had been inevitable that Norton should go there, and nothing in the least degree singular existed in his departure from Hammersmith except the sudden manner of it.

He broke the news to Rookwith at once. They were in the garden. The uncharted future, from that friendly, pleasant place, so familiar and calculable, seemed full of pitfalls.

"A private tutor's, eh?" Rookwith made a gloomy face. "About the dullest thing on earth. . . . My guardian is sending me to one next term. I tried to get him to send me to a public school."

He mused for a moment upon the turn of events.

"Why aren't your family letting you stick here until the end of the term?" he asked suspiciously.

Norton told Rookwith he didn't know. He had already decided that this was the best plan for everybody concerned. Moreover, it preserved his own dignity intact—a consideration with him, even at fifteen. And, for once, Norton's shrugging denial was taken by Rookwith at its face value. Perhaps Rookwith guessed, but also deemed it safer to let sleeping dogs lie.

"You'll have to say good-bye to the lovely Joan," he observed.

Norton nodded. "I suppose I shan't see her again."

"I suppose you won't. . . . Will you mind much?"

Norton broke off a twig, flipped it delicately but forcibly against the ear of a passing small boy and walked away. Looking back over his shoulder, after a few yards, he said: "Yes. I shall. . . ."

And, of course, he did mind. He minded leaving Hammersmith, old Pulteney, Rookwith and the rest; he minded the depressing sense of having come to the end of a chapter; he minded going (under a sort of cloud) into the ordeal of a new way of life; but deeper than all these he minded leaving Joan Stathern.

He knew that he had to do it. He was a child, bound hand and foot by his elders, without the faintest voice in the disposal of himself. It hurt, this sudden breaking-off. He was full of an inarticulate resentment, an unspoken brooding resentment against all his family, and particularly against his half-brother. But at the same time he was aware in a dim fashion that the kind of accident that had happened to him was unavoidable, part and parcel of the unblessed condition of minority—not the sort of thing that a sensible person fights against.

Still, he did try to round off his poor little love-affair. Out of the wreck he had at least saved the secret motive of his crime. Nobody knew about him and Joan. If that *had* come out—if those sublime moments in the tiny garden at Storey's Gate had become a joke, a pedantic jest on the lips of Goward—that would have been past bearing. Fortunately it hadn't happened.

He wrote a formal letter of farewell to Joan, which Rookwith got delivered to her at the Poplars. A bald sort of note it was—Norton was always a wretched hand at writing—merely informing her of his approaching departure. "My address will be, care of the Reverend Mr. Wakefield, Nellesthorpe Rectory, Lincolnshire," he added, with a gleam of hope. And then—a final unpremeditated *cri de cœur*: "Do not forget your promise. . . ."

His journey through town was closely watched by Goward and he had no opportunity to call and pay his respects to Sir Robert Stathern. Goward escorted him to the coach-office. Indeed the last he saw of London was Goward's tall, stooping figure, according him a farewell salute which endeavoured, without much success, to blend a brotherly cordiality with the natural coolness of the forger towards the forger.

"Let this be a lesson to you," he had begun, on the way to the coach.

Norton replied: "Yes, Goward,"—a colourless response that left Goward without a text for further remarks. The conversation languished. Both were glad when the coach moved out of the yard and they were at last relieved of one another's company.

Norton never had a reply to his little farewell note. For a long time he looked for one. The post brought many letters to him at Nellesthorpe—letters full of admonition from his mother; jolly, clever letters from Susan; one or two scandalous epistles from Rookwith—first from Hammersmith, later from a tutor's in Devonshire; but never by any sign did Joan Stathern remind him of her existence. He told himself that there were reasons for this, that it was prudent and sensible of her; nevertheless, many months passed

before he ceased to look for that spidery handwriting which might have let him know, at the very least, where she was, how she was getting on, and whether she thought kindly on his memory.

Love grows thin on a diet of hope deferred. By and by Norton ceased to scan his letters with the old eagerness; the thought of her was less and less the sweet crying in his heart it had been at first, and in two years, what with study and skating and the developing interests of life at seventeen, he was thoroughly reconciled to her loss. He had not forgotten her. But he had forgotten what she once meant to him. . . . After all, responsible grown-up people do the same, and very often in far less time.

Some years later, when he was at Naples finishing up the Grand Tour, somebody or other who knew the Statherms told him that Joan had gone abroad again—back to the Indies to look after her apoplectic father. Norton felt sorry for her. He had seen something of what tropical climates did to Englishwomen's complexions—to say nothing of their reputations. That keen, eager-eyed girl. . . . Well!

He shrugged, I suppose. It was a habit of his. And besides, he had other, much nearer and more important preoccupations just then.

§ II

The Marquis of Stone was a considerable landlord in that coastal strip of Lincolnshire which, from its original state, is known as The Marsh; and among his possessions was the parish of Nellesthorpe All Saints, the living of which was in his gift. Although he never visited the place, he was incomparably the most

powerful person there; but he was a good landlord, even to weakness, and his absenteeism was no affliction to his tenants. He always paid his agent a fixed salary, instead of giving him a percentage of the estate income—the latter an iniquitous practice that everybody knew led to all sorts of petty tyrannies and oppressions. Life flowed by easily among the cattle-breeding farmers of that country—so far, at least, as their finances were concerned.

And with equal ease life flowed by the Reverend Mr. Wakefield, rector of the parish. He was still a young man, of pleasing appearance, cultivated tastes and episcopal ambitions. At this time, too, he was unmarried, the predestined lady of family and fortune (with whose hand Providence always sooner or later rewards the good and careful clergyman) not having made her appearance upon his horizon.

They sat down five to dinner each day—the Rector himself, elegant and distinguished; his housekeeper; Norton; an adolescent baronet soon to move onwards to a University; and Norton's nephew, Morval.

Lord Morval was a month older than Norton, his uncle—an oddity of relationship which occasioned some decorous clerical mirth at the dining-table. The facts were that the Marquis' eldest daughter—the girl Louisa whom his second wife had borne him—had married young, so that she was delivered of her first-born, Morval, slightly before her stepmother gave birth to Norton. Lady Stone had been a trifle displeased about it. Louisa, she thought, might well have waited a little longer.

Anyhow, Morval was born, and was now at Nelles-thorpe, for Louisa had shared with Lady Stone a deep mistrust of public schools. He was a cleverish boy,

with a serious mind, an exacting conscience and no sense of humour. There was a good deal of Goward in Morval's make-up.

The third student, the baronet, came of a fox-hunting family. He introduced fox-hunting into the conversation whenever he could do so by guile or brute force. His aspirations were exclusively venary—a vision of endless misty ridings-forth at early hours along muddy, well-beloved lanes. A limited personality—but at least never likely to take you by surprise.

At Nellesthorpe, Norton studied as he had never done with Doctor Pulteney. There was, of course, little else to do. The square, magnolia-covered rectory, moated, with tree-shaded lawns and a large flower-garden, was an oasis of culture and delicate living in the midst of a bucolic waste. Not, of course, literally a waste, but socially so. That part of Lincolnshire boasts few county families, no territorial nobility, no country seats, no organized field-sports. The inhabitants breed red, sullen-eyed cattle, kill them as necessary, and live on the proceeds. They go to church. They do not read, neither do they write, save on considerable provocation. A pastoral people, though not in the poetic sense.

"My herd," Mr. Wakefield always called them—always, that is, in company which was not likely to make very intimate contact with the "herd". He used the expression one day as he was walking with his three pupils along the marsh road to the coast—a frequent occasion for peripatetic instruction.

Norton felt a faint distaste at his tutor's airs of superiority towards the parish, but said nothing.

The baronet was absorbed in vulpine reflections.

Morval, with a frown, began:

"Do you think you *ought* to speak of your parish-ioners in that way, Mr. Wakefield?"

"How do you mean?" The Rector smiled confidently. "As 'my herd'?"

"Yes."

"Oh, I don't know." He gazed across the endless level pastures all around, golden with buttercups, dotted with red steers. "It's a cattle country, isn't it?"

Morval pondered. "I'm not sure that that has anything to do with it."

"No? Well, if I had a sheep-farming parish, I should refer to 'my flock'."

"Ah, that's different."

"How?"

"That's Biblical. 'I am the good shepherd' and so on. There's nothing about cattle in the Bible."

"I suppose that's because the chosen people chose to keep sheep," Mr. Wakefield explained airily. "Besides, what about Pharaoh's lean kine?"

The conversation became zoologically diffused. The baronet remarked that foxes were mentioned in the Bible. "Foxes have holes," he stated firmly.

"Swine!" Norton ejaculated.

"I beg your pardon," Mr. Wakefield said, his voice faintly alarmed.

"Gadarene swine," Norton explained. "In the Bible, you know. And the Prodigal Son kept swine too, didn't he?"

He yawned. These futile talks, these walks of three or four together bored him. He missed the comfortable confidential intercourse with Rookwith, and Rookwith's cynical, astringent humour. Strangely enough, the nearest thing to Rookwith here was the

Rector, who could be excellent company in a party of two. Not that he ever felt entirely at his ease with the Rector. Mr. Wakefield's sleek good humour had a fundamental basis of insincerity that he barely troubled to conceal. The man was a fine scholar, whose books were his dearest possession; but he had not the true scholar's perfect freedom from the world. He was a climber as well, and unless anything unusual happened, his patron's influence and his own personality would probably land him at length in some modest sunny haven of the spiritual peerage. Meanwhile he waited, confident that he was not the sort of person who dies at a ripe age as the incumbent of a place like Nellesthorpe.

Norton had found him reading Martial once. The volume had been lying on the table where the Rector, called away to marry two of the herd, had hurriedly flung it. Norton's classical erudition did not at that time embrace the Epigrams of Martial, and he opened the book in a spirit of casual curiosity. The word *puellae* caught his eye. That was a promising word, at least. A girl was a girl, in any language. He tried to read on. It was difficult going, but the sense was reasonably clear. . . . Deeply astonished, agreeably piqued with his discovery, and meditating whether he should tell Morval the joke, he wandered out into the garden. Finally he decided to keep the thing to himself. There is a secret pleasure to be had in not telling something slightly discreditable, especially of a cleric.

Of course, at this time, Norton was older than in the Joan Stathern days—older, and less pure in spirit. What had been a sacrament, was now a quiet jest. Sexuality had begun to tease him. And also, about a

mile from the Rectory, almost under the lee of the sand-hills, there resided a certain farmer's pretty daughter. . . .

§ III

The Marsh of Lincolnshire breeds, in addition to its red cattle, a race of dark-haired, dark-eyed girls. The girl at the farm was one of them. She was really attractive, and it was inevitable that she, or someone like her, should have happened in Norton's life at this period. That summer—a fine hot summer—he took innumerable walks to the sea, quite alone, on all sorts of pretexts. Indeed, in after years, the thought of Hannah—that was her name—was inextricably mingled in his mind with the picture of the Marsh road that led to her: the hedgeless expanse of coloured fields; the dikes that bordered the road; the cornflowers, poppies and yellow flags at the water's edge; the slowly revolving sails of a windmill; and always, in the distance, the tumbled grey-green line of the dunes. . . .

There, near the windmill, was the warm-coloured lichened roof of her father's farm. At the back a path led over the last field and up through the hot, silent sand-hills. A big bush, a veritable giant among the stunted vegetation of the sand, marked the rendezvous.

He knew that he was being unutterably silly. Of all the mad things that he might have done, this was the maddest. But week after week he went on with it. The dark-eyed figure in the hollow under the bush was a point of interest, of romance, excitement—something to look forward to in the uninspiring routine of the Rectory. They did not talk a great deal—her country speech revealed too clearly the differences between them. Nor did they demand too much of

each other. And, in the end, as it fortunately happened, the girl was sensible and intelligent enough to cut the painter in time. If she had not been sensible, if she had been an ordinary foolish girl, blinded by the notice of so exalted a personage — But she wasn't. And though he resented it at the time, he came to see, as the years passed, how much he owed her. She married a farmer, and Norton used to send her children little presents, and take an interest in their future. . . . I wonder sometimes whether she did not love him at least as much as any of those other, more splendid women who came afterwards. There is no knowing. The people of the Marsh are a close, secretive race, who keep their hearts to themselves. And, in any case, he had given her a memory, a poem of summer that neither of them would ever entirely forget.

That, happily, was how it turned out. But at the time, anything might have happened.

She was gathering some sort of herb in the sand-hills when he found her. He had been down to the edge of the sea, over the wide dry sands where the water never comes, and further still, across pools and rivulets of the tide, to the very end. In restless moods, moods of spleen and the *malaise* of youth, he often found comfort in the solitude at the water's edge, and a blessed relief from all Rectorial irritations in the utter aloneness, the great sweep of the sky, the grey indifferent vastness of water in front of him, the dark blue horizon, the wind ruffling his hair, and, at his back, those interminable empty sands. Down by the water, at low tide, the shore sloped perceptibly, so that he could not even see the sand-hills.

For a time he mooned around, looking for curious

shells, sending flat stones dancing over the water, watching the waves. Overhead clouds chased before the sun, so that the shore was sometimes ablaze with light and heat, sometimes cold and shadowed.

He looked at his watch. Time to be getting back. Back to boredom and Morval. Perhaps, though, there would be a letter for him. That was something, in these days. . . .

Climbing over the sand-hills he missed his usual path, and floundered about for a time among the prickly sand-plants. It was ever so quiet there. You seemed to be all alone in the world, a sunny, silent world, whence life had vanished. Finding a hollow sheltered from sun and wind by an overhanging bank he decided to rest his legs before tackling that mile of baking road which separated him from the Rectory.

Somehow—for it was not his habit—he fell asleep.

When he woke his lips and throat were parched. A comprehensive discomfort enveloped him. Instinctively he looked at his watch. Damn! He must have been sleeping there nearly an hour—probably with his mouth open.

From somewhere or other a voice said: "Mister!"

He sat upright. "Who's that?" he demanded severely.

"Hannah Mumby," replied the voice.

He staggered stiffly to his feet. One of them had gone to sleep. He felt cross and at a disadvantage.

"Well, what are you doing there, Hannah Mumby?" he said.

"Getting herbs," said the voice.

Then he saw that the girl was sitting on the very bank under which he had been asleep. She was young and not ill-dressed. He made her a little bow.

"Good afternoon, Miss Mumby."

She rose and curtsied.

"I wanted to tell you something, sir," she said.

"Oh, I see. . . . Have you been watching me long?"

"Almost half an hour. You'll have to rub yourself with yellow flag to-night. . . . The stems, you know. All over the places."

He smiled. "The stems—over the places? What places?"

"Where the midgets have bitten you. The spots'll come out to-night. Midgets always bite you if you lie on the sand-hills."

He considered this in silence. Then, with a grave face:

"Do you know any recipe for a foot that's gone to sleep?"

She gave him a reproachful glance. "You're making fun of me, sir."

"No, really, Hannah——"

"Well, take your shoe off and rub your foot."

He pretended to hesitate.

"If I do," he stipulated, "you must turn the other way."

She looked at him. The mood of badinage was not very familiar to her. Then, obediently, she put her hands before her eyes.

"Will this do?" she asked.

"That'll do."

But Norton did not remove his shoe. Instead, he hobbled very quickly round on to the overhanging bank until he stood beside Hannah. Then, with some precision, he kissed her.

"Oh!" said the girl, taking away her hands.

He looked solemn.

"What was that?" she demanded.

"What was what?"

"You shouldn't have done it," she said slowly.

Her eyes gradually came round to his. Her lips quivered. They both began to laugh. . . .

When they were serious again,

"Still, you shouldn't have done it," she repeated.

"Why not?"

"I might have been married or something, for all you knew."

"But you're not, are you?"

She shook her head. "No. Not yet."

They sat down on the bank together, dangling their legs over the side.

"I ought not to be talking to you like this," she added.

"No?"

"No. . . . You're the Marquis' son, aren't you?"

"What if I am?"

"Well, I'm Farmer Mumby's girl."

"I don't see what difference that makes."

She regarded him uncertainly. "You're making fun of me," she said again. But this time, he noticed, she omitted the "Sir."

They fell silent. Only the buzzing of tiny insects and the cry of a distant sea-bird broke the stillness. He watched her face, and the gentle rise and fall of her bosom.

"Do you often come here?" he said.

"Fairly often."

"The day after to-morrow—at three?"

"I might."

"I shall be"—he looked around—"I shall be—in this place—at five-to-three. Near the big bush."

"Suppose it is raining?"

"It won't be. . . ."

Nor was it. That second meeting was the real beginning. The first encounter had been accidental; the second was an affair of deliberate plan—a consideration that put matters on a different footing at once.

For the precise character of their love-making—and both at least fancied themselves in love, according to the fashion of their years—the midgets of the deserted sand-hills, and perhaps a wandering seagull, are the sole authorities. The episode did not, however, go absolutely unsuspected in other quarters. Morval, in the sanctities of his logical mind, began to wonder why Norton went out so much by himself lately, and nearly always in the same direction. The fox-hunting youth had now gone on to Cambridge so that Morval was left a great deal to his own resources. Moreover, Norton was in the habit of returning with a bouquet of yellow flags—in itself a curious phenomenon, especially as he did not apparently use them for decorative purposes. One night Morval entered Norton's bedroom absent-mindedly, without knocking—a genuine error on Morval's part, for he was not Machiavellian. To his surprise, Norton was standing on the carpet, quite naked, rubbing himself in places with a greenish mess from a saucer on the mantelshelf.

"Gnat-bites," he explained briefly, to Morval's astonished face.

"I don't get them," Morval commented, after a thoughtful pause.

"No, I suppose not." A glance at Morval's rather bony figure. "Gnats prefer beef."

That closed the matter for the moment. Morval, who was accustomed to his uncle's mode of addressing him, regarded Norton's nudity with a naïve admiration.

"You're like a statue," he said. "Apollo—Antinous—one of those people. . . . Grand Greek limbs," he added sententiously.

Norton looked up darkly from his anointing. "Shut up and get out," he remarked, "before I chuck this mess at you!"

Morval, entirely unruffled, did both. It took more than abuse to upset Morval.

§ IV

The episode of Hannah Mumby died hard. The winter of course inevitably weakened it. You cannot lie among the sand-hills in winter-time. And in that open, hedgeless, almost treeless country, where there are no woods and no deep-cut lanes, the sand-hills afford almost the only relief from the terrible publicity of life. Should a boy kiss a girl on a country road, five parishes are witness to the act. It is a bleak land, too, in the winter, a land of barbarous winds that drive furiously from the cold savagery of Russia, straight across the people of the Marsh and their affairs. . . . But next spring Norton began to walk regularly towards the sand-hills again. The year that had passed, moreover, had wrought a change in both lovers. He was almost a man, she quite a woman. . . .

Still, it must not be supposed that Hannah Mumby filled the whole of Norton's horizon during those two years at Nellesthorpe. There was, for instance, the shadowy but very real presence of his mother—never corporeally there, it is true, but never leaving him for long without some token of her anxiety for him. At the right seasons, oysters came from her, and oranges also; she sent him pomatum and honey water for his hair, intended to be used on alternate nights and guaranteed to promote a thick and lustrous growth; and never a

letter did he receive without some word of exhortation, some tirade about those dreadful Opposition people at Belgravia House, some improving anecdote about Papa. . . . "My Lord was quite angry. He told them that such conduct might indeed serve their purpose well enough now, but that only Truth and Justice could bring a man peace at the last."

Norton had lingered a moment over that phrase. It called up a picture of his father, shy, limited, prejudiced, but very sound at heart, very sure to do things in the grand manner when—as in the case of Goward's signature—some crisis seemed to have arisen. He was—there was no denying it—autocratic, aloof, impenetrable, inhabiting a world above the level of his family, who invariably had to use Lady Stone as an intermediary in all their communications with him. But he could be trusted never to be mean or petty—never to lose his poise.

It occurred to Norton to wonder whether, at that age, he would be so great a gentleman as his father.

These were the fateful years when Revolution was beating on the doors of France. Morval got tremendously excited about it, and read all the newspapers that purported to throw any light on the matter. From Stone came alarmist letters from Norton's mother: "This is all the doing of those Belgravia House people, with their fine ideas, their airs of superiority, and all their immorality and irreligion. I'm sure some of them would like to see the dear King in the Tower and the P. of W. sitting on the throne. But, thank God, so long as we have Mr. Pitt at the helm——"

All her letters brought in the Prime Minister like that. So young, so clever, so prudent, and with it all

so modest, so fond of his old mother, so gratifying in the way he would submit things to the Marquis for his opinion! If only Norton followed Mr. Pitt, he was bound to do well. But it would break her heart if he ever became one of the Belgravia House Whigs. . . . Then she used to stop suddenly, afraid that she said too much. "You will think me a great bore, Norton dear. But you know that you will have your own way to make in the world. G. will do nothing for you."

(G. was Goward, of course, and the P. of W. meant George Prince of Wales. Initials were a very precious epistolary possession of Lady Stone's. She felt she could be as censorious as she liked about initials, where to write full names would have been distinctly improper.)

But actually Mr. Pitt, the Whigs and the French Revolution made hardly any impression on Norton. There were so many more important things. In the winter the dikes in the Marsh overflowed, furnishing a whole month's perfect skating. And there were glorious summer holidays at Scarborough and Stone, and Christmas holidays in London, with the delights of the play, the opera, the Christmas parties given by his numerous cousins. (He was not yet admitted to the midnight balls and routs of his elders.)

One night at *The Rivals* Susan, sitting in the box beside him, nudged his arm during one of the intervals.

"You see that box over there?" she said.

He looked vaguely across.

"That woman in blue satin," Susan added.

Among the many, many toilets across the house Norton distinguished a female in what seemed to his inexperienced eye to be blue satin. He nodded.

"What about her?"

"The Duchess of Belgravia," said Susan.

Norton saw a lady no longer very youthful or very beautiful, speaking to a tall man who stood beside her. The tall man was bending slightly to catch her words, with one hand resting on the back of her chair.

"Who's that with her?" he asked.

"That's her lover," Susan said, adding: "The present one, I mean."

"Is she really as bad as——?" He glanced over his shoulder cautiously. Lady Stone, who had left the box for an airing in the corridor, might return at any instant.

"Not really bad, I should think. Only silly. All froth—you know the sort. I went there one day, you know."

"What—to Belgravia House?"

His tone suggested that Susan might have inadvertently crossed the threshold of a brothel.

"Countess took me," Susan explained, with a wary eye on the door of the box. "She told me not to tell Mama. Anyhow there was nothing to see there."

She clearly regretted that none of the famous orgies had been taking place when she called.

"I don't suppose they're really so dreadful," Norton said temerarily.

Susan was more decisive: "No, of course they aren't!"

They gazed in silence at the Circe in blue satin who was laughing up into the eyes of her lover, there across the house. Something in that laughing look stirred in Norton a recollection of Hannah Mumby—an absurd comparison, he told himself, but there certainly was a resemblance. Perhaps all women in

love looked like that. For a moment he was tempted to tell Susan about Hannah Mumby, but just then, fortunately perhaps, Lady Stone came back.

"My dears," she said, "why didn't you remind me that this play was by that Sheridan man? If I had remembered I wouldn't have come to-night. You know, of course, that he is one of the Belgravia House set and"—the inevitable phrase came out—"and *all those people*. . . ."

The mention clearly pained her. She made a wry face over the words as if she were tasting sour cream.

A minute later, as the play was resumed, Susan turned slightly towards Norton and was guilty of an undeniable and most unladylike wink. . . .

§ v

Norton's second summer at Nellesthorpe was fluttered by two events of some importance in the world of Stone. One was Charlotte's marriage, the other Goward's appointment as Ambassador at Paris.

Exactly why Goward should have been chosen for this post was far from clear. He had no diplomatic experience; he was comparatively young; and Paris was unquestionably at the moment the most important Embassy in Europe. It was a riddle—as much a riddle as his brilliant marriage a few years before had been.

Anyhow, to Paris Goward went, accompanied by his wife. The Marquis had tried to dissuade him from taking the post, not because he lacked sympathy with Goward's ambitions, but from a sense of the real danger of the place. How real the danger was even he did not entirely recognize then—certainly Goward did

not recognize it, nor the Countess. Not that such a recognition would have kept them in England for a day. Goward, after all, was a Fitzwarren. He had, moreover, the courage of his own self-confidence; and the Countess had the courage of her increasing ennui. To both of them, the Paris Embassy in a time of revolution offered priceless gifts.

Of Charlotte's marriage there is less to say. Her husband was a young courtesy Marquis. He had a long nose. One day, possibly not far hence, he would be a Duke. There was nothing else conspicuous about him. He did not in the least share Charlotte's piety, but he was full of admiration for her person; and, there being no other way out, he took the piety along with the person.

These happenings reached Nellesthorpe dimly—the official versions through Lady Stone's letters, the scurrilous secret history through Susan. Susan's communications generally finished with a postscript: "You had better burn this when you have read it." Norton always did. There are none of Susan's letters of this date extant in the archives of the Fitzwarren family. . . .

Life at the Rectory—a hotbed of the Humanities—kept an even tenor. Mr. Wakefield, a pagan at heart, and a Christian only by profession, loved the ancient writers for the sake of the world he found pictured in them, and not in the least because it was necessary that he should be familiar with them for purely utilitarian and conventional ends. Something of this spirit he tried to communicate to his pupils.

"You will find," he told them, at the close of a morning's Horace, "that certain things on the surface of the earth are liable to constant change—fashions

in dress, in politics, in modes of thought. Other things change a little—there is less cruelty now in the world, for example, less intolerance. And many things never change at all—things like dawn, sunset, spring and autumn—the loves of men and women. . . .”

Norton, listening, thought of Hannah Mumby. His mind went wandering. That afternoon, he was due to meet her again.

Morval was disposed to challenge Mr. Wakefield. “Don’t you think, sir, that”—he hesitated and became slightly pink—“don’t you think that what you called ‘the loves of men and women’ have tended to become much *purer*?”

Mr. Wakefield considered. “At times, perhaps, at times—they seem so.”

“I think there has been a definite forward movement.” Morval’s face was solemn and embarrassed, but he was determined to go on. “Forward from the days of the savages, I mean, sir.”

“I see. And you don’t think that men and women in their loves are always a little—savage?”

“Why, no—not in these days!”

“Ah, well. Perhaps when you are older——”

Mr. Wakefield left it at that. Norton, watching them lazily, his chin in his cupped palm, pondered. That phrase his tutor had used. . . . *The loves of men and women* . . . ! Did it mean just a simple primal urge—nothing more than that? Surely there must be something else, something better than that, waiting for him out in the world. . . .

He rose. Presumably he would find out about it all, in good time.

That summer lingered well on into the official autumn. On a glorious golden brown day of October,

Norton walked to the sand-hills, where he was to see Hannah as usual. But, for the first time, Hannah was not there. For an hour he waited in the hollow under the tall bush, constructing and demolishing tumuli of dry sand, listening for every faintest noise, puzzling over what could have happened. At last he gave it up and went down over the sands to the water. It was empty and desolate, as always, save for a distant boat heading towards Grimsby. He was conscious of a vague anxiety. On the occasion of their last meeting, a few days ago, he half suspected that he and Hannah had been disturbed. There had been, he thought—she had not noticed it—a crack like a dry twig broken underfoot. And for a second, something that might have been the shadow of somebody passing near the hollow. . . .

Restlessly he turned away from the water. As the tumbled line of the dunes came into view again over the sloping shore, he could see a dark figure perched on the highest point of the range. He stopped, shading his eyes from the sun. . . . No, it wasn't Hannah. His heart sank. It was a male figure—suspiciously like Morval's.

He went forward again. Yes, it was Morval, sitting up there like a bony sphinx surveying the desert. Norton quietly cursed. He had intended to take another look at the hollow by the bush, in case Hannah might have come after all. Now it would be impossible.

He halted immediately beneath where Morval was seated.

"Hello!" he called up.

Morval said, "Hello," without enthusiasm.

"You been made preventive officer here?"

"No."

Norton began to climb the slope of the dune. When he was at the top, Morval surprisingly said :

"You must not come here any more, you know."

Norton looked at him.

"Oh. . . . You've bought the sand-hills, have you?"

"No."

"What's the matter with you, then? A touch of the sun?"

No, Morval's health, it seemed, was quite unimpaired. "I want you to be serious for a few minutes," he added, gazing steadily at the Grimsby-bound vessel on the horizon.

Norton sat down.

"That girl——" Morval began.

So that was it. The shadow the other afternoon—that had been Morval.

"I see." Norton flushed. "You followed me today. A very good idea. . . . I'm sorry you were disappointed."

"That's not fair."

"Why not, Peeping Tom?"

Morval's face did not move a muscle. "Don't be a damned fool, Norton," he said mildly.

It was rarely Morval damned anybody. Norton knew that, beneath his academic calm, he must be deeply moved.

"All right," he conceded. "But I don't see what my meeting a girl has got to do with you."

For some minutes there was silence between them. Then Morval said :

"I can't stop you from doing what you want to do. But you're playing with fire. Suppose there were a baby——"

"Impossible."

"So far, perhaps. . . . And besides, for all you know, you might be one of several. You might have to father some farm-labourer's child— No, I'm not filthy-minded. But it's too risky a game altogether. . . . You're not being fair to yourself, or to Mr. Wakefield, or to the family. And assuming she's the sort of girl you suppose, you're not being fair to her."

Norton said nothing. His sulky, supercilious manner adequately conveyed, for the time being, his thoughts about Morval.

"I haven't mentioned the moral side of it," Morval remarked, quite undaunted, and thereupon proceeded to mention it in detail. It was for the landlord class to be examples of virtue to their tenants, not to go about debauching their tenants' daughters. When he, Morval, married, he would go to his bride as pure as he would expect her to come to him.

Norton, rising to reply, told Morval briefly that he could go to his bride in any way he pleased, and, further, that he could go to Hell at the same time, for all that he, Norton, cared. Having made this clear, he made his way back over the sand-hills, leaving Morval still conscientiously surveying the North Sea. As he passed the hollow by the bush, he glanced cautiously around. No sign of Hannah anywhere. Obviously, something must have happened. Surely Morval could not have been telling tales? It was, of course, just like Morval to take the opportunity for a private lecture. But there was a world of difference between that and telling other people. Norton, notwithstanding their quarrel, couldn't accept so low a view of Morval as that.

None the less, for several days the Rectory was a place of tension, an arena of impending storm. On

the Saturday evening following Morval's manifesto, Norton was in the garden finishing a novel. The light was almost gone, but the crescendo of the book absorbed him.

Somebody came across the grass.

"You will strain your eyes, Norton," Mr. Wakefield said kindly. "Besides, the evenings are very chilly just now. We must not send you to Oxford with a bad cold."

It was supposed to be Norton's last term at the Rectory, before going on to a University.

Rather ungraciously he shut his book and rose.

"Shall we take a turn up the road?" Mr. Wakefield suggested. "So far as the bridge and back, before going in?"

There was nothing unusual in this proposal, but Norton sensed trouble. Instinctively he tried to evade it.

"I really wanted to write to my mother," he hesitated.

"Plenty of time for that. You know very well you never manage more than twenty lines at the most."

Norton smiled unhappily and gave way. They strolled together over the lawn and out through the gate.

On the Marsh road it was chillier than in the sheltered garden. A light sharp wind blew from the sea, and the sky was streaked with the passing of the sun that had just set behind the low wooded range of the Wolds, half a dozen miles inland. In the vast, quiet emptiness of the great plain, blurred now by the dusk, the lowing of a cow several fields away was indescribably mournful and lonely.

Mr. Wakefield spoke first, opening the ball with a

brusqueness which seemed to suggest that, if the thing were not done boldly, it might never get done at all.

"I would rather you did not go to Mumby's Farm any more, Norton," he said.

Having begun, he awaited developments. The boy beside him—as tall as himself, and on the edge of manhood—showed no signs of having heard. Sauntering on, in the slouching slightly round-shouldered fashion of seventeen, he kept his eyes fixed on the road before him. In the half-light Mr. Wakefield could not see the expression of his face.

"I had no idea this was going on," the Rector added, "or I should have spoken to you before. . . . I don't want to discuss the rights and wrongs of it, of course. You didn't come to me for moral instruction. But if you would give me your word——"

Norton made what seemed to be a gesture of exasperation.

"Was it Morval who told you?" he demanded.

The question took Mr. Wakefield by surprise.

"No," he said at length.

"He hasn't hinted anything to you?"

"Nothing."

"Who was it then?" The petulant young voice sounded somewhat appeased.

Mr. Wakefield explained. The girl's mother had had her suspicions for some time. At last she had cross-examined Hannah and got the truth out of her. Hannah had surrendered the secret of the summer into the hands of her parents. And, Mr. Wakefield was pleased to say, they were behaving very well about it. They were satisfied that no great harm had been done, and they showed no desire to make capital out of the affair. But Mr. Mumby had had a long talk with Mr.

Wakefield, it seemed, and they had both agreed that the episode must end at once. Sufficient honour, the farmer felt, had already been done to the house of Mumby.

"So that's that," Mr. Wakefield concluded. "Now, have I your word?"

Norton replied at once:

"Oh, yes, I suppose you have my word."

Not a very good grace perhaps, Mr. Wakefield thought. Still, the boy was only a boy after all. And no doubt he was hit. . . . "That's excellent," said Mr. Wakefield, with a sigh of relief.

Then the tall boy beside him, most astonishingly, began to quote a line of Latin verse. The words came out slowly and bitterly, as though he meant them. And they resolved themselves at last into an angry, satirical and improper fragment from one of Martial's Epigrams.

Mr. Wakefield, out of the plenitude of his scholarship, recognized the quotation. He rose to the crisis.

"I didn't know you read Martial," he said casually.

"I don't," Norton admitted, "very much. . . . But that bit is true, isn't it?"

"I suppose it is."

"I read it in your copy. Last year."

"I don't remember lending it."

"You didn't. You left it about."

Mr. Wakefield pondered. "Next time you want it, don't be afraid to ask me for it, will you?"

"But isn't Martial"—Norton hesitated—"isn't he supposed to be obscene?"

The eighteenth-century Anglican rector, promenading the country road of his parish in the dusk, permitted himself a slight shrug.

"Life," he said, "sometimes is obscene."

They had turned and were nearing the Rectory again. Under the dark trees that shrouded the entrance to the drive, Mr. Wakefield stooped to unlatch the gate.

"Lord Norton," he said formally, "I am a rather older man than you. In a few years you will be out in the great world—the world of the few thousand people who count. . . . Well, there is another passage from Martial that I would recommend to your notice."

He proceeded to recite it, with loving care for the value of each syllable.

"I'm sorry, that went above me," Norton confessed. "What does it mean?"

"Briefly," said Mr. Wakefield, "it means that no prudent man soils his own courtyard."

He looked up at the sky as they crossed the damp lawn. "I almost think it will rain to-night," he said.

§ VI

The Rector of Nellesthorpe was right. In the small hours Norton woke to hear a gale of rain and wind beating on his bedroom window. Autumn, long delayed, came with a rush. The weather was cold and wet on most of the days that remained until the end of the term. The dikes flooded. The sand-hills became a dank and friendless desolation. Morval went about with a perpetual cold.

Once again, before he left Nellesthorpe, Norton saw Hannah. She was driving along one of the Marsh roads in a cart with her father. Neither of them looked at him as he passed, muffled up in his big, expensive top-coat against the rigour of the north-easter.

Possibly she did not recognize him. Possible, but unlikely—all other considerations apart, top-coats of a fashionable cut are not so common in the Marsh that they do not more or less identify their wearer.

The cart bowled along between the dikes, turned a corner, was lost to view, then reappeared from time to time, smaller and smaller until at last Norton's final backward glance failed to discover it anywhere. The cart, and Hannah, and Hannah's father, were swallowed up in the vast bleak landscape of the Marsh. . . .

Some weeks later the Autumn term—the last term that Norton and Morval were to spend with Mr. Wakefield—came to an end.

That gentleman himself left Nellesthorpe not very long afterwards. Preferment, and a Lady Elizabeth Something-or-other arrived together, so unexpectedly as almost to be *embarras de richesse*—after the manner of the good and evil of the world. But Mr. Wakefield never reached York or Canterbury. In fact he did not squeeze on to the Bishops' Bench at all. Chance—and perhaps the ultimate claims of his scholarly, philosophic temperament—led him to the Deanery of a provincial Cathedral. He liked it, stayed there, and died quietly at an advanced age there, reading some old pagan book in his garden chair, about the time that the excellent influence of the young Queen Victoria and her husband began to be felt in the homes and vicarages of England.

CHAPTER IV

INTERLUDE AT PARIS

§ I

BEFORE Norton had been more than a few hours at Stone that Christmas, his mother said to him, in the rather hushed, momentous tone with which in his younger days she had been accustomed to offer him a ripe peach or some special outing:

"How would you like to spend a fortnight at Paris?"
Paris! After Nellesthorpe!

He left his mother in no doubts as to his sentiments.

She beamed, feeling happy as always when she was doing something more than usually unselfish. When the proposal had first been made—it was difficult to say just where it had originated—she had resisted it. For one thing, it would rob her of Norton for two precious weeks. For another, well—Paris had always been a Babylonian place in the old days and it was not likely to be better now, with that Mirabeau man in power. Against these considerations arose others—Norton would enjoy it; the experience would be good for him; Goward seemed quite anxious for him to come. And, in the end, Lady Stone gave way.

"You will stay at Goward's," she explained. "They have the Hôtel de Montecarlo now. The Princess has gone away and is letting it. You will meet all sorts of people."

Norton pondered. To stay at Goward's—well, that was inevitable, he supposed. And, of course, Countess would go far to make amends for her husband.

"I shall go alone, I suppose?" he said.

"Why, no, dear. The idea is that Morval should go with you." She glanced at her son, uncertain of how he would receive this proviso. "We thought you would be such company for one another. . . ."

So it came about that, in the early days of the New Year, Norton and Morval travelled together to the English Embassy at Paris. Neither had ever been out of England before, and the sense of a common adventure healed the breach which the affair of Hannah Mumby had occasioned in their relationship. Not, indeed, that this had ever been serious. No breach can be serious where the feelings are not deep. To Norton, Morval was a part of his environment—a blood-relation, his half-sister's son, somebody he had grown up with. They accepted each other tolerantly, caring as a rule too little about their differences of temperament to emphasize them by attempts to reconcile them. Morval, indeed, would probably, with any encouragement, have expatiated quite often upon Norton's indolence, his incurious mind, his self-sufficiency. But that encouragement was lacking—you cannot profitably lecture an audience that quite plainly is not listening to you.

Paris, that January, was to all appearances a grey and sober place. If intrigue and excitement existed—political, Babylonian or other—it did not rear its head. Those were the golden days of the Revolution, before Mirabeau died, before Varennes, before August the Tenth and the deluge. It really seemed, to people not in the know, that matters were going satisfactorily. The King and Queen were practically prisoners, it was true, but they were understood all the same to have embraced the new Constitution quite voluntarily and

out of a sincere regard for its merits. People who could leave the country were doing so, but that did not necessarily mean anything. The King's aunts were supposed to be leaving; Condé had left; d'Artois was gone, and was even now scouting around the Courts of Europe for armed support against the National Assembly. And the Courts of Europe—a long, cautious line of them—were still sitting on the fence. There was some excuse for people thinking that Fox was in the right after all, and Burke in the wrong.

At the Hôtel de Montecarlo, Countess received her two guests open-armed. This is of course the proper and conventional way to receive guests, but there are degrees of sincerity in its performance. Countess, Norton thought, seemed really glad to see them.

"Goward's in bed," she announced. "Biliousness."

Norton made sympathetic noises.

"And rheumatism," she added. "This place doesn't suit him. The French cooking upsets his stomach. And it's so damp."

Morval listened attentively, and later in the evening the first batteries of his curiosity opened fire. What, he asked Countess, were the peculiarities of French cooking. Why did it upset Uncle Goward's stomach? Wasn't it possible to get an English cook?

She endeavoured to satisfy him, as became a hostess. It was plain to Norton, however, that Goward's disorders bored her. Watching her across the table, he mentally estimated her age. At the time of Goward's marriage he had heard she was twenty. That would be just over three years ago—possibly four years. At most she wasn't more than twenty-four. And quite pretty.

He continued to survey her off and on for the rest

of the evening with a tired and disillusioned air. That was his pose just then—the backwash of the *affaire* Mumby.

She was, he reflected, a great lady. To-night she was at her private table, talking to two boys. Tomorrow she would be the Ambassadors of England, receiving the French nobility—or such of it as had not bolted—amid the splendours of her public salon.

In the lull that followed Morval's culinary enquiries, Norton, said:

“Are there many titled people left in Paris?”

Countess seemed relieved to change the topic of conversation from the detail of her husband's diet.

“Quite a few,” she replied vaguely. “Some go every week. Only last Monday we exported a duke—such a nice, good little man, like a dear little canary. He is taking a house at Richmond.”

They smiled at each other.

“I don't know why they go,” she added. “Things are so dreadfully settled here now. It is really the dullest city in Europe.”

Morval emerged from his thoughts.

“I should like,” he said, “to watch the National Assembly at work one day, if I might.”

Countess replied that he might. “But it will be dull,” she warned him.

“How do you mean—dull?”

“Well—just tiresome legal business—stuff about taxes and appointing commissioners of this and that and the other.”

But it seemed that this was what Morval liked.

“When can I go?” he asked.

She promised to ask Goward. As it happened, at that moment, a message arrived from the sick

Ambassador himself. Would Norton and Morval go upstairs to see him now?

They went. In a large bedroom of the Hôtel—it had been the bedroom of its absent Princess, and the ceiling was decorated with Cupids—an austere and ochreous Goward was lying against pillows. He turned a wan eye towards his visitors and extended one hand—a slightly damp, not quite pleasant hand.

"How are you, Norton? How are you, Morval?" He smiled a pale, invalid smile. "Splendid to see you both."

Norton hoped he was feeling better.

"Oh, yes, a great deal better." In fact, he was getting up to-morrow. "Such a volume of work to get through. And so necessary to keep in daily touch with things."

"Countess was telling us matters are settling down," Norton observed.

"Ah!" He groaned a little, as the rheumatism gave him a parting twinge.

That was the only comment he permitted himself regarding his wife's views upon the Parisian situation.

"You might like to see the deliberations of the Assembly one day," he added condescendingly.

Morval promptly and truthfully said that this was what he had been looking forward to most.

"And you too, Norton?" Goward asked.

It was clearly expected of Norton to say Yes. He did so.

"I'll try and arrange it to-morrow," Goward promised. "It will be a great experience for you boys, a unique chance!"

He reflected for a moment on the uniqueness of the chance he was providing for the boys, then abruptly decided that he was tired and dismissed them.

"Go and entertain the Countess," he commanded. "She would like somebody to play cards with, I expect. . . ."

The card-playing was tried, but Morval gave it up after a few hands. He did not know the game. Could he go to Uncle Goward's books and find something to read?

"There's nothing very amusing there, I'm afraid," Countess said, doubtfully.

Morval thought he could find something to his taste and went off, returning presently with two large and alarming volumes under his arm.

"Have you found something?" Countess asked.

Yes, Morval had. *History of the French Fiscal System*, he announced.

Norton said: "That ought to be good."

Countess looked at him. Once again, they smiled at each other.

"Your play, I think," she said.

It was, Norton considered, quite the most delightful way of spending an evening. Cards were a luxury to him, for Lady Stone and his father were both very much against his becoming a gambling man, and from his earliest days he had been accustomed to hear diatribes against card-playing. Naturally, he took to it, when the opportunity came, as a duck to water.

And besides—he was definitely conscious of it—playing cards with a pretty woman added enormously to the excitement of the game. Even when she was a lot older than you. And your half-brother's wife into the bargain. Once, when a card fell to the carpet, they both stooped for it simultaneously, and their hands touched. . . .

Norton, with beginner's luck, won the last and deciding game.

"What were we playing for?" she asked him, joking. He looked at her, with his smiling, expressive eyes, and shrugged meaningly.

She understood.

"You are a bad boy," she said.

§ II

On the following evening Countess "received".

In her *grande parure*, standing with the long, thin, mournful Goward close to the door, she greeted her guests as they arrived. Very different she was now, Norton felt, from the young woman—hardly more than a girl, after all—who had played cards with him only a few hours ago. He would never have dared to think of a flirtation with this unfamiliar and imposing creature.

Loneliness, the sense of being out of things, invaded him. Last night he had been almost a man—now he was thrust back into the undignified status of boyhood again. It was damned disagreeable.

He looked round for Morval. Morval, however, had found somebody else to talk to—an elderly Frenchman who seemed to be expounding something. People who expounded, Norton considered, ought to be made to do it in private. Anyhow, he wasn't going to sit and listen to stuff about the French Fiscal System. He hadn't come to Paris for that.

A sigh escaped him. He retired to the fireplace, leaned against the marble mantelpiece, thought about Hannah Mumby and felt *gauche*.

Two people, a thickly powdered youngish gentleman and a lady of riper years, came to sit on a sofa near the fire. Presently they began to talk. Norton became aware that "Madame l'Ambassadrice" figured largely

in the conversation, and somebody who seemed to be called Malplaquet. There was a good deal of dignified, low-toned laughing, and a great many shrugs. Then, abruptly, the lady touched the powdered man's sleeve.

"That is the one," she said, in French.

Norton looked towards the other side of the big room, where a gentleman was bending over Countess' hand. He seemed to be quite an ordinary person, and Countess appeared to receive him precisely as she had received her other guests. Wondering vaguely who this Malplaquet could be, he left the vicinity of the sofa and drifted friendlessly over to Morval. Possibly the Frenchman had finished expounding by this time.

Morval regarded his approach without enthusiasm, but introduced him perfunctorily to his French friend.

"We were discussing the matter of the bishops," he said.

Norton looked blank. "What bishops?" he asked.

"Surely, my dear Norton!" Morval was mildly incredulous.

"No, really. What have the bishops been doing?"

"It's what they haven't been doing. Do you mean to say you don't know about the bishops refusing to take the oath?"

That was unhappily what Norton did mean. He wished he had stopped by the sofa. The elderly Frenchman was smiling indulgently, and Morval had begun to half-apologise for his relative's ignorance.

Then Norton sneezed. It was a painful, violent sneeze.

"I've got a bad cold coming on," he said resentfully, as though the bishops and their oaths were somehow to blame for this. . . .

Unexpectedly, Countess appeared.

"Come along, you two," she said. "I want you to meet some ladies."

Morval showed signs of disobedience. He would much rather stay where he was, if Countess didn't mind.

"No, come along," she urged.

"Please, Countess."

"Oh, all right, if you like—you come then, Norton."

She glanced around for something suitable to begin with.

"Morval is absurd, isn't he?" she said. "Now, let me see, who is there here?"

She decided to open the attack with two mature ladies seated in a corner. They both wore jewels and an air of foreign capitals. And they were both Princesses. ("You must not imagine a Princess is anyone special over here," Countess told him afterwards.) The Princess Chirsky appeared to be a Russian lady from Petersburg. The other Princess Norton did not catch the name of. She was short and spoke French with a German accent.

By and by Countess left him with these ladies. Conversation was difficult, for his French was by no means Parisian. When he had told them the date of his arrival, how long he expected to stay, and what he thought of Paris, his stock was exhausted. And he was aware that in their eyes he was not a person of much account. They were not the sort of middle-aged ladies who enjoy the attentions of young men. Both had daughters, and both were more interested in probable husbands for their daughters than in possible lovers for themselves. Norton was a younger son, and they knew it. But they were none the less very gracious and well-bred.

"When do you make the Grand Tour?" the Russian lady asked him.

Norton thought, in two or three years' time.

"You must let me know when you come to Petersburg."

He promised he would. It was polite, and meant nothing. Presently Goward came and carried him off to meet some men. He had a number of fresh names flung at him, and smiled into an equal number of fresh faces. They all asked him—fortunately—the same questions as the two Princesses. And all the time the increasing rawness at the back of his nose told him that he had a really bad cold developing.

At length the time came for the people to leave.

Countess, having got rid of the last, of them, surrendered to the yawns she had been trying hard to repress during the final hours of her reception.

"Thank God that's done with once again," she said. "Will you play billiards with me to-morrow afternoon Morval?"

Morval pointed out that to-morrow afternoon they were due to go to the National Assembly to hear the deliberations.

"Oh, yes, I forgot. . . . Are you going, Norton?"

"I expect so." Another vigorous sneeze shook him.

"Unless it's likely to be very draughty there," he qualified.

At this moment, most embarrassingly—for he hated to be the centre of such scenes—a nauseating faintness swept over him, so that he almost tumbled to a chair; simultaneously his nose began to bleed, and he felt sick.

"Oh, damn!" he said weakly. Then, as the fear lest he should be sick over the Princess of Monte-

carlo's carpet gradually ebbed: "I'm *dreadfully* sorry, Countess—making a mess like this——"

In the sudden confusion, Goward rang bells, produced hot and cold water, and gave numerous orders.

"I think," he declared, "that Morval had better go by himself to-morrow."

They got Norton to bed. . . .

§ III

Next morning he lay in bed feeling heavy and apathetic.

Goward, now sufficiently restored to health to deal with all the claims of duty, came to see him, closely followed by a servant bringing breakfast and medicine. Goward himself had directed all this, as he explained in detail to Norton. He also made many acute and pertinent enquiries about Norton's physical condition, his past liability to fainting fits, the present state of his bowels, and so on: nodding and pursing his lips wisely at Norton's answers. Finally, with a parting injunction as to the use of the medicine, he went away to complicate a little further the already complex diplomatic situation between England and France.

In a little while, Morval came. He was cheerful and offensively healthy, and he asked how Norton was feeling.

Norton said he was feeling bad.

"I'm sorry you can't come to the Assembly with me to-day," Morval confided.

Norton said Yes, so was he.

"This question of the bishops," Morval continued, "is bound to be interesting—very interesting. It seems that only two of them will take the oath to observe the new Constitution—a fellow called Talleyrand and someone else."

"How soon are you starting?"

Morval wasn't sure. He had to see Goward first. Goward was sending an Embassy clerk with him.

"Well, as you go down, tell somebody I could eat another egg, will you?"

Morval went.

In a few minutes the egg arrived. Then a servant came to take his tray and to enquire after his further wants. After that for an hour there were no more callers until about noon when Countess looked round the door.

"Hello, invalid," she said.

"Hello, Countess."

"Better?"

"A little. Won't you come in?"

"I don't know. I'm not dressed."

"I'll put my head under the sheet."

"Silly!" She came in. "I don't believe you're ill at all."

Countess, like many women of fashion, performed her morning toilet in two parts. The first and essential part—the cleaning, rubbing and curling—went on in the strictest privacy. The second part generally took place at the dressing-table in her boudoir. It consisted of nothing more intimate than delicate operations on the finger-nails and a few superficial touches to the coiffure. To this part visitors of both sexes were freely admitted, provided their presence was agreeable to Countess on general grounds.

This morning she had come straight from her first toilet and looked very fresh and blooming.

"That's a pretty thing," Norton said boldly, as she stood by his bed.

"What? This wrap?"

She smoothed the heavy silk wrap that enveloped her.

"Yes, it is nice. . . . Always give your wife pretty clothes, Norton. Pretty clothes make pretty women."

He considered this.

"I'm not sure that I agree," he said.

"No?" She smiled and sat down on the edge of the bed. The wrap, falling slightly apart, confirmed what she had said about being "not dressed".

"No, I think some women are pretty in anything," he said.

"You're thinking of somebody in particular, perhaps?"

"No," he lied. He had been thinking of Hannah.

"And no pumping, Countess," he added.

She laughed. "There have been one or two, though, haven't there?"

"One or two what, Countess?"

"You can be very dense when you like, can't you?"

She paused. "Did you ever hear of a little girl called Joan Stathern?"

He was silent, and could feel himself flushing. It wasn't fair of Countess. Besides, he thought all that had escaped notice. And—it seemed somehow a little bit sacred too, that Joan Stathern episode.

"All right, Norton!" She leaned forward, resting against the hummock of his drawn-up knees. "I won't give you away."

"I didn't think anyone knew," he muttered.

"Nobody does know—except me. And I only stumbled on it by chance."

"It's all ancient history too."

"Is it?" She looked into his eyes. "The Statherns are a funny family, Norton. I know them. They're related to me in some way I don't understand very

well. . . . You be careful, Norton. You're far too fond already of using those blue eyes of yours. One day you will use them carelessly and hurt somebody."

His brow settled momentarily into a frown.

"Did you ever see her again?" Countess said.

"Who? Joan?"

"Yes—of course."

"No."

"I did. She came to see Baby once or twice. . . . She hasn't forgotten you, Norton."

Countess smiled to herself, as at some piquant recollection. "You will forgive my lecturing you, won't you?"

"I wish *you* would lecture me every morning."

"There you are!" She gave the tumult of his knees an exasperated smack. "I believe you're ready to flirt with every woman you meet—even with me."

"Why—even with you?"

"Well, I'm what they call—of a certain age."

"Twenty-four," he hazarded.

"Wrong! Anyhow, I'm a wife and a mother."

"Does that make any difference?"

"Of course it does!"

There was a knock at the door. Countess's maid. A gentleman had called to see her—Monsieur de Malplaquet.

"Show him in, Annette. I won't be long."

She did not specify where he was to be shown, but Annette plainly required no further instructions.

"I must go," Countess said. Her half-bantering air, her appearance of enjoying Norton's novel and youthful society, had left her. There was a rather worried look on her face. "A man to see me on business," she explained, unconvincingly.

"What about billiards this afternoon?" Norton asked.

"Oh, yes, of course." She considered. "I'll let you know. I may not be free after all."

She suddenly bent and stroked his fine brown hair, with a gesture that was almost tender.

"Don't forget what I said, will you, Norton?"

Then, quickly, she was gone. . . .

He lay on in the soft bed. Women were really very odd. . . . Malplaquet—Monsieur de Malplaquet. . . . Of course. Those two people on the sofa last night—he remembered now—the powdered man and the middle-aged lady. They had been talking of Countess and this Malplaquet person.

At first he felt a sort of amusement at his discovery. Then, as he recalled Countess's expression, when she told him she must go, he wondered. She had seemed to grow suddenly older. And afterwards—that last little appeal to him—

He didn't understand. There was something in this business of what Mr. Wakefield had called "the loves of men and women"—something that hadn't touched him as yet. He gave it up.

When, later, Countess sent Annette to him to say that she regretted she could not play billiards that afternoon, as she would be engaged, he felt vaguely sorry—sorry for himself, because he liked Countess's company; sorry for Countess, who seemed to be in the toils of something beyond her strength.

He was not, however, altogether surprised.

§ IV

His cold got better; correspondingly, his interest in life revived; and he found his second week at Paris very enjoyable. Morval continued to spend a good deal

of time with the National Assembly where, he alleged, History was being made. On one pretext and another, Norton avoided accompanying him. There were always more amusing places—for instance, the Palais Royal, whither one morning, through narrow shabby streets, he managed to find his way. Though, indeed, Countess was very annoyed when she found out he had been quietly investigating the Palais Royal.

"Well, I'd heard about it," he protested. "I only wanted to see for myself."

"But you might have been accosted."

"I was."

Countess was not one to skate round thin ice. "What did you do?" she demanded point blank.

"I just said 'Adieu, mademoiselle,' and walked away."

"I see." Countess seemed satisfied. "Well, don't go hanging round there again. If you *must* talk to women——"

He looked at her with an air of grave enquiry.

"Oh, be off with you," she exploded. "You're incorrigible. I don't know what will become of you. If your poor mother knew what sort of a son she had. . . ."

She left it at that.

They both laughed. In their secret hearts they knew they were, fundamentally, birds of a feather. . . .

For all that the world of fashion had begun to abandon Paris, there still remained a number of people able and willing to give entertainment, so that Norton and Morval, going about under the ægis of the Ambassador, had no lack of dinners and receptions. That, in effect, was what they had been sent to Paris for—to meet good foreign society, to enlarge their horizons,

to learn how things were said and done in the great world. Norton, too, took some dancing lessons of a fashionable Parisian danseur: but his stay was too short for the tuition to be valuable, and in any case Norton was always a poor dancer. (Anne Caversham, in her observant way, once said that it gave her the same sort of shock as seeing a swan on dry land. But that was years later. At this time Anne Caversham was only five years old and had never even seen Norton.)

Ever afterwards, when something reminded him of his visit to Paris at this epoch-making moment of European affairs, his memories were of many halting conversations with strange ladies and gentlemen (chiefly ladies) in unfamiliar houses; of the admonitions of the dancing-master; of the cold blue weather; of talks with Countess, card-playing with Countess, billiards with Countess. . . . He was not in the least in love with her, but he liked her, and she interested him. Often, at odd moments, the thought would come to him: "She has a lover." That sort of thing one had naturally considered in an impersonal way, and talked of with a large affectation of worldliness to annoy people like Morval. But to find it in one's own family was rather different. And the contemplating of it occupied his mind to the virtual exclusion of the social drama of which Paris was just then the theatre.

One day, indeed, there had been a sort of fight at one of the *barrières*, but it was only about some goods that somebody was trying to smuggle in. Shots were fired, one or two people were killed, and the alarm beat for the Garde Nationale. But after a period of sporadic gunfire signifying very little, the excitement died down.

On another occasion, too, the Jacobins raided the

Club Monarchique, whose members had been guilty of distributing free bread to the starving poor. The Club Monarchique had foolishly imagined that this was legitimate charity; the Jacobins saw it as a plot to corrupt the citizens through the medium of their bellies; what the thirty thousand idle hungry individuals themselves thought about it is not revealed. The Municipality had been debating for months the best way to feed the hungry mouths; elsewhere the National Assembly were conscientiously considering the same point: meanwhile, bread was bread.

It was all rather difficult and anyhow, as Countess assured Norton on the last day of the visit, not really important. Things were likely to go on as at present indefinitely.

"But suppose they did get loose again," he suggested. "All that Bastille business, I mean. You would have to look out for yourself, wouldn't you?"

She shrugged. "We should bolt if things came to the worst, I suppose."

"There is always the chance of that."

"Not very much."

"In any event," Morval put in, "ambassadorial privilege would surely cover you."

Countess supposed it would. She was quite plainly not very interested in the conversation. From time to time she glanced at the clock. Then she began to walk restlessly about the room. Finally she announced that she was going out.

"Tell Goward I'll be back about six," she said.

Norton looked at the marble timepiece. Nearly three o'clock. . .

Countess returned at half-past six, languid and rather silent.

That evening, at an affair at the Princesse de Hesse's, Norton was commandeered by a nice old French baroness (guillotined some years later under Robespierre) who apparently liked his good looks and insisted on talking to him. He listened a little, and watched the company a little, his thoughts chiefly on questions arising out of his approaching journey home with Morval. Suddenly, however, he became aware of a familiar name in the ramblings of his old Baroness.

"Monsieur de Malplaquet, did you say?" he verified.

"Yes, indeed, early to-morrow morning."

"Yes, but——" He returned patiently to his point. What was it Madame la Baronne had said Monsieur de Malplaquet was to do to-morrow?

"Leave Paris, of course. He and Rochfort and Castries and——" She reeled off a string of counts and marquises and dukes. "All going to the Rhine, to join d'Artois in exile." Noble souls, giving up everything for the King. . . . But God only knew where it would end. She sighed, and began to tell Norton improper anecdotes of the court of Louis Quinze.

He was inattentive, preoccupied, thinking of the tired, pale figure of Countess as she had come in at half-past six.

Across the room he could see her now, brilliant, laughing, keeping her end up under the gaze of her world, yet nursing all the time that secret agony of loss. And Norton's young heart swelled with sympathy and admiration for her. . . .

Next day he and Morval started for England.

CHAPTER V

TREVIVIAN

§ 1

PARIS was followed by a pleasant, unprofitable spell in town. After the shabbiness of the French capital, the sound and wholesome aspect of London was something to be secretly proud of, as though by the mere fact of being an Englishman one were somehow responsible for this desirable state of affairs. Norton was in general a far from positive person, but he had no doubts regarding the rightness of everything that went to make up London.

However, the delights of London had to be left behind. The time had definitely arrived for Oxford.

There are divers reasons for going to Oxford. Norton's reason was simple. He did what he was told, just as years before he had quietly done what he was told when his parents decided to send him to Doctor Pulteney's. His mind, as the coach bumped and swayed over the Chilterns, was quite open and quite placid, neither eager nor apprehensive.

On the previous evening Lady Stone had had a "serious talk" with him. There were several matters she felt she ought to mention.

"Gambling," she observed, rather nervously.

He waited for her to go on.

"When your father was a young man," she proceeded, "he used to be very much addicted to gambling."

He had heard all this before and knew how it went on. The Marquis had played deep and lost heavily in his young days. Then all of a sudden it came to him that he was doing wrong.

"Since then, we all know, he has never touched a card, thank God!" Lady Stone paused. "I'm afraid Countess plays a good deal," she added.

"Oh, not very much." He was anxious to defend Countess.

"Did she teach you at all?"

"We had a few games one night."

"Ah!"

"It was really nothing," he protested.

"What did you play for?"

"Nothing—love!"

"Love?"

"Well, nothing then."

Lady Stone looked at her son. Perhaps he ought not to have gone to Paris after all. And yet, and yet—if not from Countess, he would learn from somebody. There was so little you could do to save a son from the things that would stain him and spoil him. She had seen a brother sinking lower and lower, first playing with friends for shillings, then by degrees losing his whole fortune. He had come to her, a discredited beggar, sponging on anybody he could squeeze. A pretty boy he had been, but by that time his weak good looks were ravaged unutterably by the life he had led. Her favourite brother, younger by a few years than herself—and now dead and dishonoured and forgotten.

Her heart ached to save Norton from such a fate—Norton, who was indeed so much like her prodigal brother in some respects. That easy acquiescence, that tendency to give way to stronger natures, those

smiling eyes—they had all belonged to the one who was dead, whom one never spoke of any longer but sometimes dreamed about as he was at eighteen, before the world had got hold of him. . . .

"I must leave it to you, Norton," she said, a trifle brusquely. "You know what your father's views are. And if you got into a gambling set at Oxford it would break his heart."

He promised he would do nothing of the kind.

"I'm old enough to take care of myself," he added, with the eternal jealousy of youth for its dignity.

She smiled, wanly, and kissed him. He was still such a baby. . . .

And now the baby, from Headington Hill, about a mile out of Oxford on the London coach-route, was regarding with a very mild curiosity the valley town where he was to have his being for the next period of his life. A valley of distant towers and spires and roofs half-shrouded in river mist, backed by a sombre range of hills. . . . It looked very lovely, very peaceful, but, to Norton, not especially stimulating.

At Christ Church he sought out Morval who had been established there since a day or two earlier. He did not particularly want to see Morval, but the assault of so many strange faces was tiresome. And Morval's logical features had at least the virtue, for the time being, of familiarity.

Morval, however, was not in his rooms. He might be found, Norton gathered, at one Trevivian's, in Peckwater. Thither accordingly, carrying himself with that air of bored assurance he instinctively affected under the gaze of strangers, he betook himself.

At the door of the room his informant had indicated, he knocked. A sound of voices came dimly from

within—Morval's and another, that he did not know. Then the voices tailed off and the door opened.

A slim young man stood there, with a dark, intellectual face. He was frowning slightly, as if the visitor's summons were a rather exasperating interruption. . . .

That was Norton's first meeting with Carlos Trevivian.

§ II

Morval's voice, from behind Trevivian, said:

"Hello, Norton, is that you?" And then: "Trevivian, this is my uncle, Norton Fitzwarren."

Trevivian looked puzzled. "Uncle?" he queried.

"Only by accident," Norton explained. "And only a half-uncle really."

Morval smiled weakly and changed the subject. "Trevivian and I were talking about the National Assembly," he said.

"I know—the bishops!"

"Don't you think it all tremendously interesting?" Trevivian demanded.

"What? The National Assembly?"

"Yes—and everything else that's going on in France now—the break-up of the old régime. . . . Everything!"

He talked quickly, jerkily. There was a kind of smouldering quality about his dark face. Norton felt that he had never encountered anyone quite like Trevivian before, and was vaguely uncomfortable.

"I really don't know——" His manner disclaimed all responsibility for the possible proceedings of the French. He only knew what Morval told him.

"I'm not very interested in politics, I'm afraid," he said. "All that sort of thing—well, I'm rather out of my depth in it."

"Of course you are. So we all are. But don't you want to take your chance in it—swim out and hope for the best?"

Norton struggled with the metaphor. What the devil was this foreign-looking fellow getting at?

"I really haven't considered the matter," he replied cautiously.

Surprisingly, Trevivian said:

"Then it's about time you began to consider the matter!"

Morval stepped in.

"Trevivian means, you see——" he began. But the dark young man cut across his explanation.

"I mean this. Here are people like you, belonging to the first families in the country—purest aristocracy—immense social influence, great position—— Well, your influence, your position are being challenged. You will have to justify yourself and your privileges before long. And all you can say about it is that you haven't really considered the matter!"

Norton smiled. It was odd but he did not, somehow, resent the gratuitous attack. The man had such a vigorous, likeable personality.

"Does everybody in this town talk like that?" he asked. "Shall I have to?"

Trevivian gave a short laugh and murmured something about "Southern blood".

"Cornish, I presume?" Norton remarked.

"With a dash of Spanish."

"Been here long?"

"This is my second year."

There followed a brief exchange of commonplaces, while they mentally examined one another and Morval browsed through one of Trevivian's books.

"Come along and see me any time you feel like it," revivian said at length.

The words had a flavour of dismissal.

"I must go and unpack," Norton said. "I'll see you later, Morval."

But Morval thought he had better be going too. "We must get Fitzwarren to meet Boreland and Tiplady and the rest," he announced ambiguously to Trevivian.

It was just like Morval, Norton thought, to have acquired a ready-made "set" in about two days. He wondered who Boreland and Tiplady were. They sounded rather like a firm of London jewellers.

As they crossed the Quad:

"Trevivian's an odd sort of fellow," he said.

"He's very clever."

"Where did you pick him up?"

"I happened to ask him the way somewhere, my first morning here. We got talking. He found out I had just been to Paris, and I was able to give him some information about things there."

Norton yawned.

"Very helpful of you. . . . I'm afraid he doesn't seem to like me."

They went in under the gateway.

§ III

In due course Norton met Boreland and Tiplady, as Morval had predicted. He met young Lord Flanders too, and one or two minor people of the nondescript and self-effacing variety, humble worshippers before the fire of Trevivian.

For it was beyond question Trevivian who ruled the group. Somehow or other—you find it again and

again—a potential leader in the world's affairs rarely gets past his University (assuming he belongs to one) without the fact of his leadership becoming evident. In childhood, or at a public school, he is not always revealed. Discipline, immaturity, the laborious business of growing up—these tend to warp the natural order of merit into all kinds of strange shapes. And then at last Oxford discovers him. The tree begins to blossom, the leader finds his place, his followers, sometimes his lifelong friends. London is full of groups, of one sort and another, that began in somebody's rooms at a College.

Looking at them critically, I am conscious of a certain lack of variety in those young men who foregathered at Trevivian's rooms in Peckwater. There were no poets among them, nobody who had more than a passing interest in music or painting. Nor were there any who professed a complete and final contentment with a life of polite idleness. It was, perhaps, this similarity of interests that brought them together around Trevivian.

Somebody had once innocently asked Trevivian, when he was still at Eton, what he intended to be when he grew up—that hallowed and irritating demand with which adults who talk to the young are wont to conceal their conversational infecundity.

"I'm going to be Prime Minister," he had replied quietly. . . .

That set the note of Trevivian's group. He was going to be Prime Minister. They were going to be his personal bodyguard, his Swiss—and also, they hoped, his Secretaries of State and Chancellors and Ambassadors.

There was Boreland—bony, stooping, not unlike

Morval in person and character. He had the same serious mind, the same heaviness of tone. But there was, actually, a very radical difference between them. Morval was a theorist who loved a good theory for its own sake. Boreland was a theorist who was only really interested in theories which could bring him some plain and calculable advancement. Nobody knew who Boreland's grandfather had been—except perhaps Boreland, who was not likely to tell.

Tiplady, the son of a clergyman who had married money, was one of those negative souls who are born to hang around. All Tiplady asked was to hang around Trevivian. He would gladly have walked naked along Holywell had Trevivian thought proper to suggest that he should do so.

Flanders was a peer of the realm, with considerable sugar estates in Jamaica. He drank and gambled and was irresistibly good-natured. It was often Flanders who would come out with the final word, the most penetrating summing-up, when the discussions grew hot or got muddled. But he invariably hid his light under a bushel of elaborate carelessness.

Then there was Norton, always modest in his demands upon the attention of the others; too consciously secure of his rank, perhaps, to desire to push himself; tolerant, easy-going, a little difficult to assess. . . .

Boreland, going home with Flanders one night, was inclined to be disparaging about Norton.

"He never adds much to any of our talks," he complained.

"He doesn't need to," Flanders said darkly.

"I shouldn't say he was well-informed or particularly clever."

"Just a handsome noodle?"

"Well, no, not that perhaps——"

Boreland felt that was too strong. Besides, it might get round to Fitzwarren and do harm. Fitzwarren's people were known to be influential.

"I suppose there is *something* about the man," he admitted cautiously.

Flanders nodded. "He is a typical Englishman. He inspires confidence without knowing that he is doing it. . . . That's a thing you can't learn, Boreland." A pause, then: "I only wish Trevivian had it. But he hasn't. It's a pity."

Boreland was shocked. "Surely *we* all trust Trevivian," he protested.

"Yes. But will the world?"

"Why, of course!"

In his heart, Boreland was not really so certain as this. It would, he reflected, be unfortunate if he had mistaken a firework for a star. Not, of course, that even in that case the position was irretrievable. There were more stars than one in the sky. He might even turn out to be a star himself, if he managed his affairs prudently.

"I think," he remarked, "that we ought to be loyal to Trevivian, whatever happens."

Flanders smiled in the dusk.

"I think so too," he said.

Boreland glanced at him sharply. You could never be sure what Flanders meant when he said things like that.

§ IV

By degrees, Norton found out things about Trevivian—odd, astonishing things, things that escaped from Trevivian when he was a little drunk or sentimental.

A tale of poverty it was, of a father who never made anything better than *mots*, a brilliant ne'er-do-well successively declining from barrister to journalist and from journalist to bankrupt wine-merchant. One foggy day he fell in the Thames and was drowned. Trevivian hardly remembered his father. But he remembered well enough being hungry—not hungry as rich little boys occasionally are, after a day in the open, or when dinner happens to be late; but hungry for mere bread-and-butter, night after night, because there was no money in the house. When Trevivian Senior went things were a little better. His widow did sewing, mending—anything that brought in some money. But even so it was a dismal life.

"Some people try and make themselves believe that it's amusing to be poor," Trevivian used to fulminate sometimes. "People who have never been through it. . . . Sitting after dinner, with their bellies full, and a glass of good wine in front of them." . . .

He would tail off into an angry grumble, his dark face sullen and brooding.

The marriage of Trevivian's parents had been a runaway match—one of the very few in an age which on the whole managed its matrimonial affairs with judicious common-sense. His mother's family, who were well-off, had washed their hands of her, and she had nothing to hope for from them. Nor, in fact, did they ever soil their hands with her again, except to make her a small allowance that relieved her immediate necessities. Young Carlos, however—the name was derived from his mother's grandfather, a Castilian—young Carlos was in due course formally adopted by his relatives, with a view to bringing him up as be-

fitted his blood. A preparatory school at Canterbury was found for him, and Eton and Oxford had followed. He was permitted to see his mother two days a year. . . .

To Norton it was all a traveller's tale, in another world from the sheltered life of Stone, closed in as that had always been by maternal solicitude and his own complete unconsciousness of want.

"It must have been damnable!" he confided to Trevivian once, with naïve sincerity. And then slowly: "You don't realise—until you're brought close up to it——"

They were walking back to the town, after a leisurely saunter in the fields.

Trevivian agreed. "All over now, though," he added quietly.

"Is it?"

"What do you mean?"

"Well, that sort of experience—I should think it made a man bitter—I should say it marked him."

"Oh, I don't know. . . . I suppose perhaps it *has* made me keener than—well——"

"Than fellows like me?"

"I wasn't going to say that."

Norton shrugged. It was true, in any case.

"It's a bad thing, being born too high," he said.

"You wouldn't change, though, if you could choose."

"Nobody would."

They walked on in silence.

"Aristocracy," Trevivian murmured, "the sacred oligarchy——"

He pointed in the direction of the castle tower, which they were passing.

"That," he said significantly.

Norton looked across towards the familiar sturdy derelict, now long shorn of its purpose and meaning. He was conscious of a vague sense of irritation.

"We're not done for yet," he objected.

"Fifty years. . . . forty years."

"Rubbish, Carlos. Who is going to take the place of men like my father?"

Trevivian laughed shortly. "Men like me," he said. . . .

That, of course, was Trevivian's way. Arrogant, careless of giving offence, supremely presumptuous. It put people off—Trevivian's group was never a large one—but inside the group it was accepted as a necessary part of his dark compelling personality.

They took themselves very seriously, that group of Carlos Trevivian's. Inevitably there was a Debating Society. It met each Thursday evening in the rooms of one or other of the members and it rarely separated until two in the morning. In this assembly the progress of affairs in France was watched with a cat-like eye. Nothing escaped the vigilance of the debaters. Instinctively it was felt that France was the key to Europe. If France settled down, monarchy both absolute and limited could breathe freely again. If not——

They dwelt long and eloquently upon what would happen if not.

It was all rather solemn, a little priggish. The members even had special coats made, light blue, with darker blue velvet collar and cuffs, and adorned with the names of celebrated orators in unexpected places. Norton refused to wear his, except at the meetings.

"It's silly," he told Flanders. "I wonder Trevivian doesn't stop it."

"It was Boreland's idea," Flanders said thoughtfully.

"Trevivian could stop it if he chose."

Flanders nodded. "He doesn't choose. I believe he likes it." Then, as Norton offered no comment: "There's something a little theatrical about him, you know—something not quite——"

Norton grunted. He did not like criticising Trevivian.

"And he hasn't any vices," Flanders added. "I'm always interested to see what will happen to a man with no vices. . . ."

Actually, however, Trevivian had the vice of gambling strongly developed. It was his only relaxation. He did not row or play tennis; he had never bought a horse and he rarely hired one; neither did he frequent the local taverns and coffee-houses. Reading and writing, with occasional walks into the country, were his life. Except, of course, the gambling.

Dice and cards seemed to be necessary to him, necessary as wine is to some men, pretty women to others. They released something in his make-up. He was a man who drove his brain hard, and his strong nature needed strong excitements. The same intensity went into hazard and rouge-et-noir as into his reading, his debating, his whole reckless, ambitious attitude to life. He was a born gambler. Some day (Flanders said) it would do for him.

They generally sat down four—Flanders, who gambled because he liked it; little Tiplady who did it because it brought him near to Trevivian; Norton, and Trevivian himself. And, intrinsically, it was harmless enough. They played for very little, and they never paid one another. One day, they were agreed, they would settle up. Meanwhile it was sufficient to

play on. Sometimes they played whist. Norton usually won on the whist nights. He had a careful, patient way of going about the game, a quiet serenity, close attention. Afterwards, when he went to bed, his mind would still be full of the cards. Spades and hearts, queens and knaves, the sensation of being unexpectedly trumped—they came back, a fantastic parade, in the dim hiatus between getting into bed and falling asleep.

It wasn't good for him. He began to look forward to the next evening's play with more than reasonable zest. . . .

One vacation he found out that his mother knew of it.

"After all I said to you," she mourned.

"It does no harm," he defended himself.

She shook her head. "It does no good."

"But we must relax sometimes."

She was not to be appeased however. The Marquis, it seemed, was far from content with the reports from Oxford. His sight had lately given him trouble; he had to spend most of his life in a darkened room; and he was apt to dwell on things.

"He sometimes wonders if you attend all the lectures you might," she said.

Norton assured his mother that he did.

"Logic and Mathematics," he explained vaguely, "and Natural Philosophy—science, you know—microscopes, rainbows, all that sort of thing——"

She regarded him doubtfully, wistfully.

"I suppose it's all right," she said. "Only—so many young men like you waste themselves at a University. It isn't enough nowadays, Norton"—her words took on a note of pleading—"it isn't enough to be well-born. You have to work, wherever you are,

and make the most of the talents God has given you. It isn't enough to be just the son of your father."

He felt uncomfortable and at the same time a little surprised. That sort of thing—that was Trevivian's talk. It sounded odd coming from his mother's lips. He had never said much at Stone about Trevivian, from a certain doubt as to whether his parents would relish the queer antecedents of a man like Carlos. . . . He decided that this was perhaps the moment to bring him out for inspection.

Lady Stone listened.

"Does he play tennis?" she enquired.

No, Trevivian hadn't that vice. It was a definite point in his favour. People who played tennis were sure to be mixed up with the idle and the good-for-nothing. If it was exercise you wanted, there were horses. That was what horses were for.

On the whole she was inclined to approve of Trevivian. . . .

§ v

Then next term he had a letter from Susan.

"Mother is very cross with you," Susan wrote. "Somebody has told her that your friend Trevivian is a levelling Whig and favours the Jacobins. She is afraid you will be infected. I said I was sure you would never do anything to help on a state of things in which you might have to work. I don't think she quite liked it. Poor mother, what with you and me, she does get some shocks. . . . Stone is a dead bore. Charlotte is here with her baby. It is going to have a long nose like her husband's. Trust old Charlotte. . . ."

Late came an indignant note from Lady Stone. She had had no idea that this Trevivian was connected with those Belgravia House people. Norton ought to

have told her. She was afraid that he sometimes kept things back. He wasn't as straightforward as she would have liked. She had to own that she was disappointed. If she thought that Norton was coming under the influence of that dreadful set, she would never have a moment's peace.

At the end of the last commination, "You had better not answer this," she wrote, "as your father reads all my letters and he might think I had written too strongly."

He obeyed the injunction and her next letter was restricted to mere quotidian exhortations to take cold baths regularly; not to dine in other men's rooms but always in hall; and to let her know if he needed money. "A certain old lady," she suggested coyly, "may perhaps manage to squeeze a little out of her allowance. . . ."

He sighed. She was, after all, so *good*. He would never, to the end of his life, find anyone half so good. One day out riding he said to Trevivian:

"What is the matter with Belgravia House, Carlos?"

Trevivian looked surprised. "I don't know," he said. "I never go there."

"But you know the people in that set."

"Only by sight—and reputation."

"I thought your relatives were—well——"

Trevivian helped him. "Only hangers-on, I'm afraid. They're rich, but they're nobodies. I have an idea that they finance some of the impecunious somebodies. But that's nothing. They never get asked into the Holy of Holies, and neither do I."

"Is it right about—what they say goes on there?"

"What *do* they say?"

"Well, the Duchess' lovers and the Duke's mistresses—all that sort of thing."

"I expect it's right," Trevivian said, adding indifferently, "I only know the general talk, of course."

Norton pondered. "Are there any children?" he demanded.

Trevivian thought there were three—a boy and two girls. "I used to see something of little Anne Caversham, the youngest," he admitted. "A queer, quiet little thing. I suppose she had always been left to servants. Children generally are in that sort of house——"

"Isn't the Duchess supposed to be very charming and clever?" Norton put in. His interest, plainly, did not centre in the infant Anne.

Trevivian pursed his lips. "Charming, perhaps. Not very clever. . . . Her sister is a good deal cleverer, I should say."

"Her sister?"

"Lady Sheen. She lives mostly abroad, I believe, nowadays. Her health is very bad, I understand."

Norton had never heard the name of Lady Sheen before.

"Is she—like the Duchess?" he enquired tentatively.

"How do you mean—amorous?"

"Yes."

Trevivian gazed darkly across at the elms standing in the light river-mist that hovered over Christ Church meadow.

"No," he said. "Lady Sheen isn't that kind. If she ever took a lover, I should say he would be the first and the last."

They rode on in silence. . . .

At the end of that term, Norton left Oxford, without a degree.

CHAPTER VI

GRAND TOUR

§ I

NOBODY does the Grand Tour now. That polite dawdle through the capitals of Europe, the final touch to a gentleman's education, belongs irretrievably to the past. Occasionally, it is true, one hears of some young scion of an ancient family spending a year or so abroad on leaving his University. But he does not go to Europe or to capitals. He goes, you find, to a cattle ranch in America or a sheep farm in Australia. It is very odd—the typical gesture of a sophisticated age. . . .

Anyhow, in that summer of '92, the ukase went forth from the darkened room at Stone, that Norton was to make the Grand Tour. The Marquis had hesitated over this. The boy was still only a boy. He really needed a tutor to accompany him, and somehow or other they could not get hold of just the right tutor. Moreover Europe seemed, to the most sanguine observer, to be on the point of blowing up.

These were difficulties—very serious ones. Still the boy had to go. In the end it was decided that he should go with young Boreland.

The choice was partly fortuitous, partly calculated. Lady Stone was secretly afraid of the Tour for Norton. She had seen so many young men come back with no better acquirements than self-importance, looseness, irreligion, mere *décor*. Nevertheless she, too, understood that for a young man of Norton's rank the Tour was

essential. To be unable in company to converse of Vienna, of Dresden and Petersburg—that definitely placed a man. Nobody took much notice of a young fellow who could not say: "When I was at Prague two years ago. . . ."

And just when the problem of a companion seemed insoluble (for Morval was remaining at Oxford) they had heard about young Boreland. Discreet enquiries revealed him as a quite unexceptionable young man, serious-minded, prudent, with no discoverable indulgences. He was plain of feature and his birth had nothing to recommend it; but these considerations, in the present case, actually enhanced his suitability: he would be a background for Norton, a dull background for a shining figure, up and down the drawing-rooms of Europe.

So at least the Marquis and Lady Stone thought. Norton was doubtful. He would have preferred Flanders; most of all he would have preferred Trevivian: but Flanders had made other arrangements, and Lady Stone would not hear of Trevivian.

He gave way. Susan scolded him for it.

"You are a fool, Norton," she told him calmly, when he announced the settlement of the matter to her.

"A damned fool," she amplified, after further reflection.

They were in the library. She suddenly shut her book with an exasperated bang and joined her brother by the window.

"You swear too much for a girl," he said, without looking at her.

"Well, what if I do?"

"It sounds bad."

"I don't care. . . . I hope to God I catch a man next season."

He yawned. He was used to Susan's realistic expressions of discontent with the restricted life of a virgin under the eye of a matron like Lady Stone.

"I bet I'll never be a good mother," she hinted darkly.

He was inclined to agree. "Boreland's coming here next week," he said. "He might fancy you."

"Your little boys are no good to me. And anyhow, Boreland is as dull"—she sought for a measure—"as dull as Gussy!"

Augusta, the eldest sister, was still unmarried.

"Besides," Susan reflected, "I can keep old Gussy in her place. I might have more bother with Boreland."

"He's not a bad sort."

She sniffed. "You're weak, Norton," she said. "You don't want to go with Boreland, but you're making the best of him because it's too much trouble to fight. . . ."

Susan was right. And, in fact, the Tour did not turn out a brilliant success. Europe, at that moment, was a place of profound political implications, the matrix of a changing world. Trevivian would have recognised this; the Tour, with Trevivian, would have been an unforgettable experience: with Boreland, prosaic, entirely practical, it was an affair of arrangements about post-horses, good and bad rooms at inns, and discussions as to the heating, lighting and entertainment at the houses they visited.

That summer, in Paris, the menace of the drums never ceased; along the Rhine, the French noblesse, the Austrian legions, high-hearted, confident of success, waited for the signal to move: Boreland passed through

it all, from Amsterdam and The Hague, on to Frankfort and Coblenz, apparently untouched by a single original impression. For him the current view of events was the right view. People said that the Austrian troops were the finest in Europe, and the best generalled. Such an army simply could not help beating the ragged Revolutionaries. Any other idea was merely fantastic. And Boreland had no use for the fantastic. . . . Norton said little in reply to all this. He would probably have adopted the optimistic view of things himself; it was so much simpler to fall into line; but he instinctively questioned anything if Boreland took it for gospel.

At Dresden they heard of Brunswick's Manifesto, and Boreland was jubilant.

"Bring them to heel," he murmured, with his peculiar sort of muted glee. "Bring the dogs to heel."

Norton happened to stay indoors that evening and spent the time writing to Trevivian. What, he demanded, did Trevivian think of it all? Was Brunswick really wise in goading the French with his violent threats?

He got Trevivian's reply at Petersburg. It was October. Everybody knew, now, that in France the incredible had happened, that the Borelands had been wrong—all those myopic Borelands of every nation who had talked of the Austrians being in Paris by the end of September. They knew, now, that it is unwise to prod a Frenchman, however defenceless he may appear; they had had the news of the Tuileries, the ghastly news of outrage and murder, the intelligence from Valmy; people had seen with their own eyes the going-down of that bright Austrian sun that had seemed so dazzling in the days of summer. . . .

Trevivian wrote angrily: "I didn't expect them to

make the best of things, but this is terrible." He had been brought up on Liberal principles, and he was bewildered. "Brunswick's Manifesto," he announced, "will live for ever as an historic example of military ineptitude, of the danger that lies in entrusting social problems to soldiers." Then, declining suddenly from this exalted plane: "Oh, that fathead, that fathead, that silly German fathead!"

In the darkened room at Stone, that one smallish room lost in the vast white pile, Lady Stone sat with her lord each day, talking to him, reading to him, receiving the orders with which, through her, he governed his family. From the Continent, from Paris, where Goward for a moment clung desperately to his Embassy, doubtful fragments of news came through nearly every day. People they had known, friends, harmless old ladies and the like, were being murdered in cold blood. It was unbelievable, but as day followed day, it was known more and more clearly to be true. The Marquis said little; ascertained that Norton was well out of France and harm's way; dictated a letter to Goward urging him to leave Paris, at whatever cost, while he could. As it happened, Goward was already on his way home. Some days prior to the withdrawal of the Embassy, he had sent Countess to Calais with an escort. He himself, so he planned, would follow as soon as he got his papers from London. But the instruction to leave the stricken city was delayed, and in the meanwhile Countess was captured by the local Revolutionary Tribunal of a small Picardy town. . . .

Norton, in Petersburg, heard about that little incident. They had imprisoned Countess for some days, before they decided that it would be more prudent to let her go. He smiled grimly—they would not get much

change out of Countess. He imagined her, insolently, ironically beautiful, proud as the devil, facing that nondescript set of provincial nobodies. . . . No wonder they let her go!

Goward reached London without mishap. He was glad to have a whole skin, sorry to lose his Embassy. Lady Stone listened with a troubled heart to his recital of horrors. Occasionally a phrase would escape her: "The poor, dear Queen!" or "Wicked, wicked desperadoes!" And ever and anon her thoughts travelled to "those people" at Belgravia House with their subversive opinions, their lightness and their lust. For the hundredth time her imagination pictured the midnight orgy—the Duke fondling his mistress, the Duchess caressing her paramour, and Fox, Charles James Fox, getting steadily drunker and poorer as he gambled the small hours away. In a dim fashion she saw that the awful scenes in Paris were a punishment inflicted on the world for having tolerated so long the Temple of Moloch at the Park end of Piccadilly.

Then one day the Marquis said:

"You had better write and tell Norton to start for home."

She looked her surprise. The boy had been away hardly six months.

The explanation came, deliberately, after a moment:

"The militia are to be called out. . . . Norton will have a commission. He must justify his uniform."

Obediently, she sat down to write. Norton—an officer of militia. . . . Her mind conjured up exquisite, terrifying pictures of her son, in a magnificent military get-up, defending the gates of Stone against hordes of Jacobins!

Then the absurdity of it made her smile. It would

be pleasant, anyhow, to have him home again, if only for a time—to have him with her, under her eye.

Of course, the commission would be no more than a formality.

§ II

At Petersburg, Norton called at the town house of the Princess Chirsky, whom he had met nearly two years ago at Countess' reception. She had quite forgotten him, but when he reminded her of Paris and the Embassy, she found that she did vaguely recall a large, fair English boy who had been at Lady Surlingham's that winter. She thereupon proceeded to mother him in phrases of Muscovite French.

"But you have grown into a man," she declared.

He warmed to this perspicuous soul.

"So tall and of such an air," she rhapsodised. "I hope you do not stay long in Petersburg, young man."

Not very long, he told her. Though, he confessed, he did not understand why she should want him to go.

The Princess became expansive and indiscreet. "Ah! You young men on your travels—you sometimes love and ride away. And perhaps leave a broken heart or so behind you."

Then she descended to customary and less intimate topics. Had he been presented to the Empress? What did he think of Russia? With whom was he travelling? And so on.

He went several times to the Chirsky house. On one occasion the Princess had a little girl with her.

"This is Natalya," she explained, "my youngest daughter. . . . Natasha, my dear, this is the young Lord Fitzwarren, whom I met in Paris."

Norton bowed and accepted his peerage gracefully. You could never get these foreigners to understand

English courtesy titles. The little girl, with a faint smile, just acknowledged him. She was sallow, with full lips; and her eyes had a curiously withdrawn, intent expression, as though she lived much in a world of her own.

"Natalya is eleven," the Princess confided. She regarded her daughter with an air of slight disparagement. It was clear that no love was lost between mother and child. "We had to rear her in Italy. She was so delicate. And now she does not like Russia. . . . Do you, Natasha?"

Ignoring her mother, the girl said:

"You are going on to Italy, milord?"

Norton was almost surprised. He had hardly expected this aloof little creature to speak to him.

"I hope to go back that way," he told her. "I should like to see Rome and Naples before I finish my Tour."

"Ah, Naples—the adorable!"

"She is more than half a Southerner," her mother put in. "Even her French she speaks like a Neapolitan. I tell her she will marry a Marchese some day—if she is lucky."

The little girl regarded her mother with a tolerant detachment, an air of condoning, for the time being, these clumsy parental pleasantries. Norton thought her rather a disagreeable little girl. It was a pity—the mother was such a nice, jolly woman, considering she was a Russian.

He left, promising to call again. . . .

He never did call again, except to pay a fleeting formal visit of farewell. The post, some days after that first visit, brought him his mother's letter about the militia. He had to come home.

For an hour or so he rebelled—stuffed the letter in his pocket, swore a little, slammed doors, asked Boreland's advice. Boreland gave his advice—it was indeed a favourite occupation of his. But actually all Boreland's excellent advice mattered no more than a row of pins. The fact was—and Norton knew it—that the Marquis, from the dark room at Stone, had bidden him home. That was enough. Home he had to go.

It was a bore. He had been looking forward to Italy as to the best part of the Tour. And now, to have to go home and play at soldiers—

Still, he went. He said good-bye to the Princess and enquired after Natalya. But Natalya, it appeared, had gone to the Chirskys' country house.

"I may meet her again," he said casually.

The Princess, as casually, agreed that he might. "When this nasty French trouble is over and things are more settled," she said.

"And tell your father," she added, "not to let you loose on Europe again without a wife. Tell him Princess Chirsky says his son is much too good-looking to be safe."

He was grateful to her for her kindly flattery. . . .

Next day, at a leisurely rate, to indicate to his parent the state of his feelings, he began to make his way back to England.

§ III

That little episode of the Princess Chirsky was the most memorable thing he brought back from the Tour. Home in England, he saw quite plainly that the Tour had been wasted. Largely his own fault, of course—his diffidence, his lazy lack of curiosity about things, his ignorance had been to blame. It was really astonishing that at his age, when he should be at his highest

point of impressionability, the spectacle of Europe should have moved him so little—he was not a bit better than old Boreland. He began to examine himself seriously. Was he, after all, just a bovine impercipient member of his class, going their ways, thinking their thoughts? So often he had heard Trevivian's half-contemptuous references to Lord John This and the Honourable Thomas That: "Nice fellow, of course, but—not much in him!"

It almost seemed that he, too, was developing on those lines, unless something happened to him.

He shrugged it away. Damn it, we were what God made us. That settled the business. . . .

For a time the Trentshire Militia absorbed and entertained him. He was—more now even than at Oxford—a man, out in the world, rubbing shoulders on equal terms with other men. Moreover the duties, till they grew stale, were quite amusing. And he enjoyed marching at the head of his company through the streets of Plymouth, where the militia was stationed. It was a simple, childish pleasure: he was aware that he looked very fine indeed, and that more than one woman was disposed to blush as he approached—that in particular the Paymaster's pretty wife was disposed to do so.

"You are *une chose à voir*, I assure you," that lady confided to him, one evening, between the dances at a military ball. Little Mrs. Courtis was young and frisky and liked to be thought fashionable. She sprinkled her conversation with a small stock of French phrases, to show how fashionable she was. Really, she was not fashionable. In fact, if she had not been so young and so frisky, you might have thought her a little common.

"But you must remember to keep your shoulders back when you march," she told Norton, assuming a quite delightful air of severity.

He replied with some appropriate nonsense, and they were soon embarked upon a vigorous flirtation. She suggested that they should go into the garden for a few minutes, as it was so stifling in the ballroom, and duly led him to a secluded corner where there were dark bushes and a romantic view over the sea. Norton had drunk a certain amount of wine that night. Indiscretion, anyhow, was in the air. . . .

She made a faint show of protest and one of her French phrases escaped her rather breathlessly. It was all a play, however. Even at the moment of her surrender he realised that. One part of him was fascinated by this pretty woman; another part of him—a detached and impersonal part—surveyed the scene with grim humour. She had got what she wanted. She had set her cap at him, and he had been willing to join the game. That was all there was in it—a young woman, bored with her husband, perhaps more constitutionally promiscuous than most women. He had roused something in her—his fine person, added to his rank, had set something going in her. She wanted him for a lover. . . .

She got him—in something under a week. The Paymaster was frequently away. There were opportunities. . . . It is the immemorial custom of the very young to walk through dirty puddles.

They rode together. There is good riding country around Plymouth. And when he passed her window, marching at the head of his company, he would draw himself up very martially, taking especial care to keep his shoulders back. She was almost sure to be there,

at her bedroom window, with a smile for him, which he always acknowledged by a military salute. So, for nearly a year, the affair went on. The regiment got to know of it; the Paymaster heard of it but took care not to listen, being a mild and disillusioned man; at last even Lady Stone became aware of it. Norton received three letters containing cryptic references to "designing women" and "foolish unsuspecting young men", all obviously intended to apply to himself. He let the challenge pass, however; and Lady Stone, rather unexpectedly, considering the gravity of the case, did not pursue the matter into the arena of direct criticisms.

Meanwhile, the business' was something to vary the common round of guarding prisoners, an exciting antidote to Plymouth Barracks, an orientation without which life would have been deadly dull.

It was dirty, of course. He didn't love her. At most, he was grateful to her. And he knew she didn't love him. She didn't love anybody. Pretty, would-be-fashionable Mrs. Courtis was too shallow for anything more real than the love-making of Restoration Comedy.

And, by degrees, they got tired of one another. . . .

"What shall I do when you go away?" she mourned one day.

The curtained half-light in her room that afternoon seemed stuffy. Norton met her eyes in the mirror over the dressing-table and smiled—a shade callously.

"Find another man, I suppose," he said.

"That's like a man, to say a thing like that," she retorted.

"I was only joking."

"No, you weren't."

He insisted, against his inner knowledge, that he

was. Going over to her, he fondled away her momentary bitterness. It didn't matter. She would get over dozens of such scenes.

"But you *will* go away one day," she lamented, stroking his hair as he bent down close to her.

Then, as he did not answer: "Won't you?"

He nodded. "I suppose so."

"And forget all about me?"

"No! No! No!" He couldn't afford to put her in a bad humour with him again. It took too long to dissipate. And he was already bored—for that day at least—with the little room and its stuffy, drawn curtains.

"I shall never, *never* love anybody as I have loved you," he assured her. The batteries of his eyes smote her and she accepted his submission, knowing perhaps in her own chilly little heart how much it was worth. . . . These men, they had their way, and then they wanted to be off. They told you that everything had been wonderful, that you were unique in their lives. And all the time they wanted to be off downstairs and out into the fresh air.

Mrs. Courtis sighed.

"You're like the rest, I suppose," she said dispassionately. "Still, I'll be sorry, in a way, to see you go."

"But I'm not going yet," he replied.

"You never know. . . ."

Mrs. Courtis was right. A few days later Norton heard from Lady Stone. Another order had been issued from the darkened room. The Marquis felt that, as Norton's Tour had been drastically curtailed, it was only right that he should have the rest of it now. An opportunity presented itself. There was a frigate

going to Toulon, convoying transports. Arrangements would be made for "long leave" to be granted. And Norton, if he liked, could spend a few months in Italy.

Italy—after all!

He went, with a thoughtful face, to break the news to Mrs. Courtis.

§ IV

So, that April, Norton set sail from Falmouth on the frigate *Juno*, bound for Toulon. Once there, ways of getting through to Italy would doubtless present themselves.

He was subdued. This journey was to be the finish of his Tour, an unexpected winding-up. He determined that he would try to bring back something worth while this time, would use his eyes and ears, buttonhole people as Morval did, and get the secret history of things—something to take home to his father and mother. They had been disappointed with the little he told them of Germany and Russia. His father had even quoted some passage from Chesterfield about young men who are too fine and superior to notice anything on their travels. And, since then, God knows he had gone from bad to worse. Mrs. Courtis, empty-headed, foolish, had been his mental co-efficient. They had babbled of local, personal details, of regimental functions, card-parties, the Colonel's lady's new dress Even Trevivian had given up writing to him, and no wonder. The few letters he had written from Plymouth had been the baldest affairs in the world, unworthy of Sacks, his servant. Though, as a matter of fact, Sacks could write a very good letter. During the Grand Tour Lady Stone had had a secret arrangement with Sacks. She knew that half-a-sheet once a fortnight was as much

as Norton would vouchsafe. And so Sacks had been instructed to send regular communiqués to Stone, whenever chance offered. The plan worked admirably. Sacks enjoyed using his pen. And Lady Stone loved reading about what hours Norton rose and retired, when Norton changed his linen and how it was wearing, what were the opportunities for baths at each town Norton visited—intimate details dear to mothers and valets.

Sacks, Norton knew, was still under a bond to despatch these reports. So far, however, while they were at sea, there was no means of sending a message home, and he felt safe for the time being from any indiscretion of his servant's fertile pen. Still, it was as well to provide for the future. He decided to challenge Sacks.

"Don't forget to write to Lady Stone when we get to port, Sacks," he said casually one day.

Sacks was engaged in surveying with a palpable lack of enthusiasm the empty plain of the sea. Like most servants he hated sea voyages. And he particularly hated this one because of the risk of getting shot or drowned. These waters, everyone knew, were alive with enemy vessels.

"Write to Lady Stone, my lord?" he repeated, blankly.

Norton nodded. "You know what I mean."

"I only write to Peggy Huston, my lord."

"Don't waste good lies, Sacks."

"My lord!"

"You ought to know by now that lies must be used sparingly. Keep them until you really want one."

"Yes, sir." Sacks had a far-away look in his eyes.

"Of course, there *was* a sort of arrangement——"

"I don't mind that." Norton put his point carefully. "But you *must* let me see *all* the letters before they go."

Sacks smiled inwardly. His lordship might have trusted an old bird like himself not to shock Lady Stone with any tales out of school. This wasn't the first time he had been abroad with a young gentleman.

He affected an elaborate density. "Should I show you the letters I write to Peggy Huston too, my lord?"

Peggy Huston was Susan's maid. Sacks, Norton knew, was courting her, after a fashion.

"Should I kick your impertinent backside, Sacks?" he remarked.

Sacks grinned. He was used to being talked to like that, and liked it. Nothing in the world would have made Sacks forsake his calling of a gentleman's servant. In the philosophy of Sacks, it was a finer thing to be cursed by a Duke's son than made much of by whole battalions of social reformers anxious to give you liberty, equality and what not. In all society, there are no Tories so high as the bondmen and hand-maidens of rank and fashion. . . .

The voyage was insufferably tedious. Toulon seemed an endless way off, and there was still the rest of the journey to consider. Then, just as Sacks was contemplating his early dissolution and a romantic burial at sea, they sighted the *Saint James*, off Majorca, bound for Leghorn with a dozen transports and Lord Flanders. The spirits of master and man rose perceptibly. Leghorn—good old Flanders, of many Oxford memories. . . . Norton went on board the *Saint James*, saw Flanders, and dashed off a line to Sacks: "Come across with all my things immediately."

Sacks was galvanised into the liveliest sort of action. That romantic burial at sea, which was to have

affected Peggy Huston so deeply, was postponed. In less than an hour, surrounded by divers trunks, he was rowed over to the *Saint James*. Ten minutes later he and Lord Flanders' servant were exchanging comments touching their respective masters.

"Got to write to the old woman about all he gets up to, have you?" The henchman of the house of Flanders considered for a moment this rather unusual proposition. "I suppose," he said at length, "you got to be—tactful."

Sacks was non-committal. "Boys will be boys," he observed indulgently. . . .

That evening, with Leghorn and dry land in prospect, he sat down to write his first report. It was fairly long and detailed. The old lady, he knew, liked a good long letter—something to read two or three times and then talk to the Marquis about. ". . . my Lord has worn his last clean linen five days already. We hope to get carriages at Leghorn and go on to Naples by road. My Lord has had enough of the sea to last him a long time and so has, My Lady,

"Your Ladyship's Most Humble and Most
Obedient Servant,

"J. SACKS."

He read it over. It was admirable. The old lady would be as pleased as Punch.

With rather less ardour, he took up his pen again, this time to write to Peggy Huston. This letter went troublesomely. Peggy was, of course, only a country girl. It was difficult to say the things she would understand, to talk down to her. . . .

He gave it up and went on deck. The gentlemen were shooting at some strange big fish that had appeared

on the surface of the water. Sacks leant over the rail, searching the horizon for the grey line that meant Leghorn.

Leghorn, dry land, women with wonderful blue-black hair, carrying themselves like statues. . . . Where were they now, that girl at Rome, that other one at Naples?

Naples. . . . He found himself whistling a little tune, a tune he hadn't heard for years and years. That girl—he had quite forgotten her name—used to sing it for him, under the dark trees. . . .

Sacks sighed, spat cynically into the Mediterranean, and went below to finish his letter to Peggy Huston.

CHAPTER VII

LADY SHEEN

§ I

FLANDERS, Norton gathered, was spending the next few months at Naples. He had been there the summer before, and had apparently liked it so well that he was repeating the experiment—a highly dangerous proceeding. When you have once loved a place in that way, you should never set foot there again.

However, Flanders was disposed to tempt fortune.

"Quite a gay lot of people there," he told Norton. "Or there were last year. I suppose a good many have left."

They were sitting on deck, at dusk. Norton mentioned that he had some letters of introduction to various friends of his father's.

Flanders looked dubious. "Who?" he queried.

Norton gave him such of the names as he remembered.

"Well, as you have the letters, you'll be obliged to call, I suppose. But——"

He paused tactfully.

"They're not the liveliest of the human race, you know," he said. "Nice old ladies and gentlemen, of course. But they don't cut much of a dash."

Abruptly he added:

"Do you know the Cheddons?"

Norton considered.

"Is that the Sir Somebody Cheddon who married that young girl—fifteen, wasn't she?—a few years ago?"

"Those are the people."

"Only know of them. Everyone heard about that affair, of course."

Flanders grunted.

"My mother," Norton proceeded, "calls Lady Cheddon a 'fashionable bad wife.'"

"That's not true, Norton!" Flanders' voice, in the dark, sounded queerly vehement.

Norton looked across at him curiously. "I don't suppose it is. My mother calls every woman a bad wife who isn't wrapped up in her husband and her children."

"No children in this case. . . . And the husband's a beast."

So that was why Flanders was going back to Naples. . . . Norton silently pondered the case. Flanders, easy-going, genial Flanders, had been swept out to sea. This wasn't playing. This was something in a different world from his own affair with Mrs. Courtis. There was suffering in Flanders' voice.

"Cheddon forces quarrels on her in public," he was saying, half to himself. "I've seen her leave a supper-table crying. And I've had to sit there and say nothing when I longed to knock that fellow's beastly face down his throat!"

Norton felt slightly embarrassed. "They don't get on, eh?" he remarked, unhelpfully.

"No woman could get on with Cheddon."

"But—generally there's something on both sides in these affairs, isn't there?"

"I don't know. There isn't in this affair."

Flanders evidently resented the mild implication that this unknown young woman might be partly to blame. Clearly he was far gone—a lost man, if ever there was one. It was rather a nuisance. A man in love is the least entertaining of companions.

"What are you going to do?" Norton asked.

"I don't know."

"Will he divorce?"

The dreadful word, with its vistas of interminable legal proceedings, infinite expense, endless unhappy consequences, seemed to jangle like a bell. Flanders, however, took it easily—like a man whose mind the word has haunted for many days.

"Divorce?" he said. "Well, that depends. I hope so."

They drifted gradually to less inflammable topics—Oxford anecdotes and talk of Trevivian, who had recently been returned to Parliament for a pocket borough, through the influence of his rich relatives. A memory came back to Norton of that evening when, riding past Christ Church meadow with Trevivian he had catechized him concerning Belgravia House, and Trevivian had mentioned the Duchess' sister, Lady Sheen, who lived in Italy for her health. He asked Flanders about her. Had he met the lady?

Yes, Flanders knew Lady Sheen quite well, it seemed.

"What is she like?"

Flanders thought. "A very good sort," he said at last. "Considering all she has to put up with."

"Another injured wife?"

"Well——" Flanders laughed weakly. "Sheen isn't an inspiring creature to spend your life with. When he isn't slightly drunk, he's sneaking off to Rome to see some opera-girl he keeps there. . . . Yes," he confirmed, after a pause, "I like Lady Sheen a good deal. She was very kind to Margaret last year."

Norton, thinking chiefly of Lady Sheen and Belgravia House, said:

"Who was Margaret?"

Flanders arose with unnecessary vigour.

"Lady Cheddon then, damn your thick head!"

He sauntered off, ostensibly to stretch his legs. Norton watched his rather short, fleshy figure disappear round a corner. How different he was now from what he had been in the Oxford days! How serious, how full of this worrying, obsessing thing that had got hold of him! It was a pity. . . . Would he, Norton, change like that?

Footsteps advanced out of the dark—Flanders coming back again.

"They say we shall run into Leghorn to-morrow morning," he announced.

There was a note of exultation in the words. Norton felt suddenly lonely and immature. For a long time, after Flanders had gone below, he sat on, listless, thinking in a vague, slovenly way about life, his future, Mrs. Courtis, marriage. And once again there came into his mind that phrase of Mr. Wakefield's, simple yet somehow mysterious: "The loves of men and women. . . ."

§ II

For a while, Norton was content to let Naples overwhelm him, to allow it to sink into his consciousness quietly. He duly presented his letters of introduction to the various elderly ladies and gentlemen whom his parents' forethought had suggested. They were chiefly Italians. Conversation—Norton's Italian being negligible—was carried on in French, with a dash of Latin. He received invitations to dinner, enquiries after the health of his mother and father, demands for the state of English opinion on the subject of European politics. With all these he dealt more or less ably, reminding himself that this Italian journey, the last

kick of his ill-fated Grand Tour, was to redeem all that had gone before. Day by day, he went about full of conscientious determination to be observant, critical, intelligent.

Naples was perhaps not the best town in the world for this exercise. A place whose beauty can overcome its odours has little to fear from rival distractions. In the Palace of Idleness, critical acumen and intelligent observation are infinitely irrelevant.

He moused around alone a good deal. Flanders was very much occupied with private business, and the letters of introduction did not take long to deliver. So he walked virtuously about, taking notice, trying to tabulate and arrange and docket things—the rose-coloured roofs; the white dust of the street; glimpses of the dark sea; the magnificent terraces climbing the hill; the Toledo, colourful, noisy, full of flowers, people and smells—all vivid and unforgettable and inextricably confused. Near the Porto Capuana one afternoon he stood for a moment to gape at the ancient gateway. So much human traffic had flowed under that gate, so many kings had ridden through, there had passed this way such pomp, such pride, such barbaric splendours. . . . Somebody touched his arm.

"Hello, Flanders," he said. "You startled me."

"Mind your pocket isn't picked," Flanders warned him, "while you are admiring the beauties of Naples."

"I was moralising. . . . That's the Porto Capuana, isn't it?"

Flanders looked disparagingly at the aged masonry. Yes, on the whole, he thought it was. Flanders was the kind of person who spends a lifetime in London without being sure where the Tower is.

"When was it built?" Norton demanded.

"A good time ago, I should say. . . . What about calling on Lady Sheen this afternoon?"

Norton forgot about the Porto Capuana.

"Will she expect us?" he asked dubiously.

"No, of course not."

"She won't mind my turning up? I mean—I'm a perfect stranger to her."

"It is clear," Flanders replied, "that you do not know Lady Sheen."

They hired a carriage and set out along the road to the Sheens' villa. That part of the world, since Greek days, has always been prolific of villas. The generations of them are everywhere under the sun, from the latest new-art building, angular without but comfortable within, to the half-buried fragment or so of stone that nobody recognizes as anything more important than a bit of garden wall: they stand under the sun, among the vineyards and the cherry-trees, among corn and myrtle and roses. They and their successors, I suppose, always will stand so, in that idyllic spot. Unless one day, Vesuvius decides otherwise. . . .

The carriage passed up a short drive and halted before a portico wreathed in wistaria. From somewhere within came the subdued tinkle of a pianoforte. A servant took their names.

Inside, after the glare of the ride, it was cool and shadowy. The place seemed bare, half-furnished. A little girl appeared suddenly from round a corner, surveyed them for some seconds with large grave eyes and then vanished again.

"Who would the child be?" Norton asked. The dim quiet hall impressed him as a church might, and his voice hardly rose above a whisper.

Flanders had had his back to the apparition.

"That would be Kathy, I expect," he said.

"Kathy?"

"The daughter."

The notes of the pianoforte ceased for a few minutes, then began again, as though the player had paused to attend to some interruption. Immediately afterwards the servant announced that Lady Sheen would see Lord Flanders and his friend at once. They followed him up a staircase, along an echoing corridor, to the doorway of a room on the other side of the house. It was a wide, almost empty room, as cool and nearly as dark as the hall had been. A lady, seated at the pianoforte, rose and advanced slowly to meet them.

"How nice to see you again!" Norton was conscious of the beauty of her voice as she spoke to Flanders—a rather tired voice, but sweet and low-pitched.

"And your friend?"

Norton sidled forward, feeling young and awkward. Flanders presented him.

They sat down and exchanged commonplaces. Lord Sheen, it appeared, had had to go to Rome on business. How long was Flanders staying? Indefinitely? That would be delightful. And Lord Norton?

"Only a month or so," Norton said. "I shall have to get back to my regiment," he added with casual manliness.

"Ah, a soldier! I thought you were doing the Tour."

So, Norton explained, he was really. And the regiment was only a militia regiment. He found himself evacuating his original position rapidly.

"I'm not a proper soldier," he confessed. "I only guard prisoners and play about."

"Not fight?"

"No. I'm not the fighting kind of soldier."

She laughed.

"Come to the theatre with us on Thursday," she said. "Both of you. Lord Sheen will be back by then. We shall be able to get some whist afterwards."

They promised to turn up at Thursday's *spectacle*.

The rest of the visit passed in the customary sort of drawing-room talk—who had left Naples, who remained, who had married, and so on. Norton, listening, watched his hostess. . . . How old was she, he wondered. Between thirty and forty certainly. In this dark room it was impossible to say more definitely than that.

When the time came for them to go:

"Good-bye" he said shyly. "Thanks so much——"

"Until Thursday, then."

He carried away with him, more clearly than anything else, that first impression of her low-toned voice, very effortless and sweet. . . .

At the door, Flanders, affecting to have forgotten something, hurried back to speak to Lady Sheen. Norton caught the name "Margaret" and once Lady Sheen said emphatically: "But you *mustn't* do anything like that!" He speculated as to what it was that Flanders must not do. Something fairly sweeping, from the sound of it. . . . Better get right out of earshot.

He strolled along the corridor. At the further end, almost hidden in a corner, he found the small, grave-eyed girl.

"Hello," he said, "are you Kathy?"

The small girl said she was. She had dark eyes and red-gold hair—a queer, arresting combination.

"How do you like living here?" he asked, making conversation.

"Very much."

"Do you always live here?"

No, not always, it seemed. "When mother gets ill, or if she doesn't want me, I go and live with my Aunt Belgravia."

"I see." He regarded her curiously. A very strange, candid child. Fancy talking of her mother not wanting her, in that way. She reminded him a little of the child Natalya at Petersburg—not physically, but there was the same serious, composed manner, the same unexpectedness. He began to tell her about Natalya, who also loved Naples. Had Kathy met her?

"No. I don't go about with other children much."

"Not with your cousins?"

"Oh, yes, of course, at Aunt Belgravia's there are always Anne and Georgiana."

Norton gathered that between these young ladies and Kathy no great volume of love was lost. A peculiar child altogether. Just then Flanders came up and swung Kathy jovially in the air with the kind of hearty greeting he considered proper to the young. The small girl regarded him balefully, smoothing her rumpled dress. . .

"Disagreeable brat," Flanders remarked, as they bowled down the drive. "I can't think where she gets it from. . . . What do you think of Lady Sheen, by the way?"

Norton hardly knew. He tried to piece together the lurid ideas he had got from his mother, the fragmentary evidence of Trevivian and his own impression of the woman herself, in the dim, half-empty room he had just left.

"I liked her," he said, non-committally.

Flanders grunted, as though he considered the reply unsatisfactory.

"I thought," Norton amplified, "she seemed a rather cold type."

"How do you mean—by comparison with her sister?"

"I don't know her sister. By comparison with my own anticipations, I suppose."

Flanders was silent for a minute. "Her sister's a wood fire," he said at last. "She crackles and blazes, but she's soon over."

He left it at that, permitting Norton to make the obvious inference.

Back in his own room, Norton remembered that he was due to spend Thursday evening with one of his father's letter-of-introduction people. Damn! It would clash with Lady Sheen's party. He surveyed for a moment the vivid cacophonous roadway beneath his windows, abstractedly weighing the pros and cons of his problem. To upset, perhaps, his father's friend—or, alternatively, to give up the evening with Lady Sheen.

The solution of the problem was not far to seek. He drifted back from the window, got out paper and pen, and wrote an excuse to his father's friend.

§ III

The theatre party went off well. Flanders was inclined to be *distract*. His mind was obviously elsewhere than on the rather dowdy provincial entertainment which was the best Naples provided. The rest of the company, however, were magnificently free from his *malaise*. If the distemper of love—love to the point of

suffering—had ever afflicted them, they gave no token of it now. There was a great deal of laughter. Lord Sheen repeated a number of borrowed jests, some nearer the wind than others. He had returned from Rome in good spirits and was prepared to play the host to the top of his ability. Norton thought him fatuous and slightly unwholesome. The others, all travelling English, discussed Naples, compared it unfavourably with London, discovered that they had common acquaintances in Clarges Street and St. James's Square, and were flippant about the tragedy of France. Somebody knew a man who had been in Paris lately.

Lord Sheen said: "By jove, really?" His meditations absorbed him for a moment, then, "I say," he added seriously, "is it true that the pretty women get let off?"

Nobody answered. Norton, glancing at Lady Sheen, saw that she was biting her lip. The man who knew the man who had been to Paris looked embarrassed and muttered something about really not being able to say.

Lord Sheen shook his head judicially. "Well, I was told—on the best authority, mind you—that Robespierre lets the pretty ones off." He cleared his throat. "My informant added—these were his very words——"

"Curtain going up, Sheen," Flanders remarked. . . .

Afterwards, at the villa, they played whist until very late. Norton, after a perfunctory protest, took a hand, Lady Sheen lay on a sofa close by, watching over her guests, talking nonsense to one, metaphysics to another. Her voice, Norton felt, was a definite distraction. Phrases slipped from her, clever phrases, casually uttered words that were somehow illuminating. He

wanted to think about what she was saying, to look at her, instead of concentrating on these damned cards. Then, by degrees, the old fascination of gaming, the siren that had got him by the throat in the Oxford days, took possession of him. Lord Sheen made the stakes higher and higher. At this rate, with bad luck, Norton was conscious that he might lose more than he could afford. Though so far he was about even. . . . From the sofa a low-toned voice said:

"You're playing too high."

Sheen took no notice. Norton, feeling vaguely guilty, replied:

"Last game, Lady Sheen."

She gave him a grateful look. Sheen, without glancing up from his cards, called out:

"Flanders, fetch Lord Norton's nurse, will you please."

There was a general laugh, rather forced. Norton said:

"Your game, I think, sir."

He pushed his chair back and one of the others took his place. The whist went on. He glanced around for a clock. . . Half-past two. He had an Italian lesson at eleven next morning.

An unconquerable yawn rose up within him. He struggled to stifle it, but in vain. Retreating towards a portrait that hung over the fireplace, he let the yawn out, as discreetly as he could, in the long-nosed Italian face of the patrician gentleman whose quondam ownership of the villa the portrait commemorated. As he turned back to the company he noticed Lady Sheen smiling at him.

"You would not have done that in his lifetime," she said.

"I had hoped I was unobserved."

She laughed. "To suppress a yawn indefinitely is the most difficult of the social arts—and the one you need the most."

"That's dreadfully sweeping, isn't it? I rather like society."

"So did I at your age."

He made a wry face. "I suppose I do seem very young."

"Oh no. Not so very young. . . Sit down here."

He sat down on a chair beside her. An odd pair, they made—the big-made young man, splendid in his militia uniform, a "pretty boy" hardly out in the world yet; and the woman of thirty-odd years with her thin intellectual face and languishing bright eyes under strongly marked brows. For a moment each looked at the other with a sort of polite curiosity, a mutual suspension of conventionalities.

"You are fond of cards," she said.

He admitted it.

"You'll be sorry one day."

"Oh, I don't know——." He shrugged impatiently. "That's how mother talks."

"She is a very good woman."

He was surprised.

"You know my mother?"

"No, I don't know her to speak to. But everybody knows that she is a good woman."

He found himself saying:

"Good women are more difficult to live with than—women not so good."

Lady Sheen took this in silence. He felt that it was a false step.

"At least," he amended, "I mean——"

She laid a hand on his sleeve, smiling at him reproachfully.

"Don't say a thing like that to me again, will you?" she said.

He flushed.

"It's the kind of thing I've heard for years and years—ever since I was married. . . . And it's rather cheap, isn't it?"

"I'm sorry," he said.

He really was sorry. This strange woman, the sister of the notorious Duchess, had somehow become more valuable to him than any woman he had ever known. Except of course, his mother.

His thought emerged:

"You must meet my mother some day."

"She wouldn't like me."

"Oh, nonsense!"

"I'm fashionable, you know. And not a Tory. She classes me with the bad wives, I expect."

All this, he knew, was incontestable. He fell back on platitudes.

"Life's very odd, isn't it?" he observed.

She smiled again. "It gets odder as you grow older. . . ."

At half-past three the party broke up. Norton, driving back with Flanders, through the gorgeous Neapolitan night, was aware that something new had entered his life, something supremely significant.

"How old would you think she was?" he asked Flanders, breaking a long silence.

Flanders said: "Who?"

"Lady Sheen."

"She's thirty-two."

"I thought—round about that."

Another long hiatus. Then, as the carriage rolled up the deserted Toledo:

"Why the devil did she marry Sheen?"

Flanders replied that he didn't know. . . .

§ IV

In the weeks that followed the affairs of young Lord Flanders were manifestly approaching a crisis. His man, discussing the matter at a street corner with Sacks, took the gravest possible view.

"I'm thankful *I* don't have to write home reports to anybody," he confided.

Sacks made a discreet but expressive face. "Wine, women and song, eh?"

But no, that wasn't quite the point. "He's not that sort. It's worse than that." Dropping his voice to a stage whisper: "Lady Cheddon," said Flanders' man.

"How d'you know?" Sacks asked him.

"Eyes and ears, my boy."

Sacks whistled. "A bolt, eh? A sort of sporting leap together out of the country?"

"I tell you——" There was a shade of resentment in the tone. "I tell you I'm afraid to settle down to sleep at night for fear I'll be called out suddenly to be present at the elopement!"

"Yes. They don't think of us."

"Besides the scandal and everything."

A young woman passed, balancing a basket of flowers on her head. Her poise, under the slightly swaying burden, was superb. Sacks' attention wandered from his colleague's grievances. He did not belong to the class of servants who live in constant dread of being "put upon", nor was he particularly interested in the affair of Lord Flanders and Lady Cheddon. But he

believed in being all things to all men, and he kept up a respectable commentary of "Not likely" and "Too true they do", while the flower girl disappeared slowly from sight.

"Lord Norton goes on very mild," he volunteered at last.

"One of the quiet ones, isn't he?"

"Oh, I dunno."

"They're as bad as any. I bet he's up to something."

Sacks made contemplative sucking noises with his lips. In his romantic heart he would not have minded seriously if his master had been "up to something". People were only young once. He was disposed to think that Lord Flanders' henchman was making a fuss over nothing.

"I dunno," he repeated vaguely.

A carriage rolled by, raising the white dust of the roadway. There was a lady seated in the carriage, talking to a young man who rode alongside on a brown horse—apparently a hired horse, not in too good condition. The young man was leaning sideways to catch the lady's words.

Sacks' sucking noises ceased abruptly. He stared after the carriage, shading his eyes from the sun.

"Well, I'm blowed," he exclaimed moderately.

The other turned to gaze in the same direction.

"Wasn't that your young fellow?" he said.

Sacks equivocated. "Who? Lord Norton?"

"Yes."

"Can't properly see, with this sun."

"Well, I tell you it was."

Lord Flanders' man expectorated triumphantly, laying a small fragment of dust. "Didn't I say he was up to something?" he demanded. . . .

Norton, however, was in actual fact up to nothing—not even seduction or adultery. As he rode along beside Lady Sheen he was conscious of great happiness. Since the evening of the theatre party he had seen her frequently. Society in Naples was necessarily a small affair, and the gay section of it even smaller. You inevitably saw the same people at dinners, balls, out riding, at the theatre. It was therefore nothing at all compromising to have met a lady every day for a month.

The days had passed—more pleasantly than any he ever remembered. The Sheens had taken him under their wing—that is to say, Lady Sheen had done so. How Lord Sheen regarded him it would be difficult to say. In any case that gentleman had retreated to Rome again.

Idyllic days, days of sun and roses, of pale olives and dark cypresses, of blue sky and distant blue hills; days, almost, of innocence; such days as neither Norton nor Lady Sheen would ever forget. They were rarely entirely alone, yet it was not long before he came to see that whoever else might be present, each said and did things primarily for the other.

It wasn't love, however: at least, not love as it was practised in Mrs. Courtis' curtained chamber. There was indeed nothing that he could compare it with, in all his experience. And, for the time being, they both called it friendship. The world, fortunately, took the same line. After all, he was twenty, she thirty-two.

More than once they had long pleasant discussions of this love-and-friendship question.

"When one is neither very young nor very pretty

" she began one evening.

"Well?" He waited for her.

"Well, friendship *has* to be enough, hasn't it?"

He shrugged. "Why shouldn't it be enough?"

She looked at him curiously. He was so fresh, so apparently unspoiled. What exactly did he mean? Was he really the formal nature he pretended to be?

"Friendship is best, of course," she agreed. "And less exhausting, too."

They were standing on the balustraded loggia in front of the Sheens' villa. On the road, a little way off, somebody was playing a guitar. They listened. The wild sad little Neapolitan tune, tugging at the heart, made them both silent.

"Is love—real love—always a miserable business?" he said at last.

"I don't know. Misery and ecstasy, I suppose."

"Flanders, for instance," he suggested.

"That's a special case."

"He's madly in love. . . . I don't understand. I've never been like that." He thought fleetingly of Joan Stathern. "Not since I was a boy," he qualified.

"I'm sorry for Flanders," she said. "Half Lady Cheddon's trouble is just bad temper and discontent."

"He doesn't think so."

"Of course not."

"You think he's making a rod for his own back?"

She nodded. "We all do that, sooner or later."

"H'm." He pondered this, then abruptly swerved.

"I don't think friendship is possible between a man and a woman," he postulated.

She considered. "Young man and woman?"

"Young enough to feel"—he indicated the diminishing notes of the guitar—"to feel the meaning of that."

"I don't think it is possible either," she said.

He heard her laugh nervously.

"We're talking rather foolishly, aren't we?" she added.

"Perhaps. No woman has ever talked to me before about these things."

"They will," said Lady Sheen.

There seemed to be an undertone of sadness in her voice. . . .

The days passed.

Even the rainy days, when the sumptuous world was suddenly grey and depressing, were not exempt from their tribute of contentment. You could talk, for example, as pleasantly indoors as in the open air. Lady Sheen would sometimes play to him on her pianoforte, and one afternoon even tried to teach him how to play. He was not very apt. By the end of the afternoon, however, he could play for her, with one finger, the air the guitar had sung, that evening on the loggia.

He wrote a few dull, perfunctory letters home. It was troublesome. The difficulty was to paint a picture of his life at Naples without mentioning Lady Sheen. The old problem of *Hamlet* without the Prince. His mother complained that other people told her more about his affairs than he himself did. He reflected grimly that this might well be so.

And all the time his feeling for Lady Sheen remained in the same queer, anonymous category. He loved being with her more than anything else in the world. Her personality, the bright, languishing eyes in the thin face, puzzled and dominated him. He knew, too, that she was not indifferent. It even seemed to him at times that he might have *carte blanche*, so far as he dared.

Somehow he did not dare. It wasn't simply that she was older than he, a woman of the world, with children and a position in society: all that was very flattering but nothing more. Deep in him he felt that to change the quality of his feeling for her might put her in the same class as Mrs. Courtis. And he could not risk it.

Still, there remained an *impasse*. Things would not go on for ever like this. Men and women are not born to be friends.

Meanwhile she was a delightful companion, a case—ment opening on to a new world. He shrugged, shelving thus the menacing possibilities of the future. After all, the present was what mattered.

§ v

I do not wish to convey the impression that they behaved like lovers, these two, or that the world thought them lovers. Nothing, indeed, was further from the truth. For all that she talked of being “neither very young nor very pretty”, Lady Sheen was a profoundly attractive woman, at a period of life when a woman whose charm is not merely a transient affair of bloom and good teeth is most devastating. It was quite natural that she should have young men about her, and in fact she rarely lacked one. To the Neapolitan world, therefore, Norton was merely Lady Sheen's latest young man. Nothing more serious than that.

By degrees, he found out things about her—that, in spite of the young men and the gay society she moved in, she was desperately lonely; that she suffered from a complication of internal disorders causing her almost constant slight pain; that she lavished on

her sister, the Duchess of Belgravia—a kindly, shallow soul—the devotion she would have given her husband, if he had happened to be a man who valued that sort of gift.

Norton learned, too, that his original estimate of her, as “a cold type”, was grotesquely wrong. When, out riding one day, he told her of this first impression, she laughed with real enjoyment.

“Me! A cold type!”

“I know better now,” he reminded her.

“You don’t know everything even now.”

He asked what she meant.

“My silly impulses and *childishnesses*!”

She turned to him with her bright, speculative gaze.

“You don’t believe that, do you?”

“I don’t think you could ever be silly.”

“But I am. When I meet strangers I always pose as rather mysterious and statuesque. You know the kind of thing— And they always find me out. . . . I’m quite commonplace really.”

He had ridden beside her carriage to the woods at Astroni, and they had walked up the hillside by the footpath until she said she was tired. Now they were resting. It was peaceful, not too fiercely hot, there on the edge of the woods. Around them the quiet, indifferent mountains stood sentinel.

He sat beside her, pensively prodding the soil with his riding whip.

“If you are commonplace——” He looked up and the riding whip described a slow circle from left to right, as far as they could see. “If you are commonplace, then, *this* is commonplace.”

But she only shook her head. “You have to live with a woman to find out how ordinary she is.”

He did not return to the argument. Surreptitiously, she watched him—his big body, wearing its clothes as only Englishmen's bodies can; his too, too perfect features, dappled now by the shadows of leaves; his brooding smile. Was she letting him mean too much to her? After all, he was a good deal like her other young men, whom she forgot the instant they ceased to amuse her. She had suffered, one way and another, and now she was always on her guard to exclude from her life everything that might, in the end, make her suffer more. To love Norton, she knew, would do that beyond hope of remedy. . . . So far, the questing beast had not reared its head. She wondered if it ever would. He was only a boy now, of course, a little afraid of her, content to be allowed to be with her, to touch the hem of her garment. But would he always be content? Not always, she knew. Men were like that. If you loved a man, if you liked to be near him, if you found pleasure in him, in the play of his mind, the facets of his personality—sooner or later you had to pay toll. . . . Dispassionately, with the frank realism of her age and class, she wondered whether he was still a chaste man. On the whole, from one or two things he had let fall, probably not. It didn't matter anyhow.

She sighed. The tune they had heard on the loggia stole into her mind. It was there before she was aware of its presence, and unconsciously she began to hum the air to herself. Norton glanced up significantly.

"I didn't realise I was humming that," she said. Then: "By the way, I found out its name yesterday—it is *Addio, Napoli*."

He seemed, for the moment, unperturbed—the young Englishman in his customary chain-mail of casualness.

"Isn't it a pretty name?" she pursued.

Without answering her he repeated, very softly ·
"Addio . . . Napoli. . . ."

She felt that she had encountered something unexpected in the depths of his nature and was vexed with herself for her shallow comment.

He rose. "We'd better be getting back," he said. He helped her to her feet, and brushed the dried grasses from her skirt with his hand. Slowly, the tall broad young man and the elegant fashionable woman, they descended the uneven footpath together. The valley swallowed them up.

§ VI

One other exquisitely coloured memory he took back to England when at length the summons to return reached him. Memories like these somehow glorify the place they haunt. It is easy to imagine that, long after we are dead and gone, these fragments of intense and lovely experience still people the old spots, like kindly wistful ghosts that have something to impart, but cannot tell you precisely what it is. That is perhaps why certain of the Mediterranean shores, with an especially long record of human association, human culture and refinement, loves and tendernesses and cruelties, can never be quite as other countries are. The past is in the air. The ground is sacred ground. . . .

This particular memory of Norton's was of a sight-seeing visit to Paestum. He had been to Pompeii, had ridden painfully up the slopes of Vesuvius; had, in fact, done all the things sightseers do. These expeditions had always been made in the company of members of the English colony, with a sprinkling of

travelling people like himself—never with Lady Sheen. Sight-seeing tired her. Besides, she was an old Neapolitan and knew the sights by heart. One day, however, Norton mentioned that he had arranged to go with a party to see Paestum.

She looked thoughtful.

"What sort of a place is it?" he asked.

"I was only there once. It's a long way. I thought it strange. . . . I wanted to go again, but somehow I never did."

He glanced at her. "It would be jolly if you could come to-morrow," he said humbly.

She was silent, divided between the impulse to go with him and the fear of overtiring herself. The impulse, after a brief struggle, won.

"I'll be ready," she said.

Actually, at the appointed hour, she was not—but that, he began to find, was one of her characteristics, her "childishnesses" that she had insisted on confessing to him. He did not complain. The discovery that a goddess has human failings is, at first, anything but displeasing.

They went by way of Salerno, distributing themselves among the inns there for the night. There was a great deal of badinage. The men all tried to be each a little more brilliantly funny than the rest. The women coquetted, gossiped and grumbled. Somebody said:

"I thought Flanders was coming."

"Lady Cheddon had the finger-ache," somebody else replied.

The remark was received without applause. It was felt to be in bad taste. Lady Sheen, entering the breach, brought the conversation round to a less painful subject. . . .

In the morning they all went on to Paestum, a clattering, chattering crowd on horseback and in carriages, an English hunt hot on the scent of two or three aged and mysterious Greek temples. The sumptuous blue-and-gold weather enveloped them; they were cheerful, definitely out to enjoy themselves, making jokes about everything—even about their nocturnal encounters with divers Salernine fleas. . . . An odd, essentially English spectacle, in an alien setting.

Inevitably, after a time, they separated. For a while, Norton lost sight of Lady Sheen. Then, early in the afternoon, after the light and light-hearted *al fresco* meal which the organisers of the expedition had provided, they wandered off together. Everyone else did the same. The hillside received them, in twos and threes, into its ample bosom.

Lady Sheen found a shady spot under the portico of one of the temples and they sat down. For a time neither spoke. The lonely, sun-baked place, set between the mountains and the sea; the peace of afternoon; the process of digestion; all conduced to somnolence. It was sufficient to sit there quietly, on the threshold of the temple of the old gods, enjoying the light breeze, the pastoral landscape of orange-trees and pines and long fields that flowed down into the plain at the sea's edge.

Some rooks, wheeling round the pines, began to caw; the breeze gained a little in strength and set the long grasses rustling. Clumps of pale flowers, like lilies in a deserted garden, waved around the base of the deep gold fluted columns of the portico. Norton watched them idly.

"What are they?" he said, breaking the happy silence at last.

She glanced at him amusedly.

"Those flowers? Don't you really know?"

"No."

"Those are asphodel flowers," she said.

She saw that he raised his eyes thoughtfully from the pale flowers to the dark Tyrrhenian Sea, very far away.

"They grew in Paradise," she added.

He nodded. "They still do."

A little emerald green lizard darted from one crevice to another, over the gold stones of the temple. They watched it disappear.

"Asphodel," Lady Sheen observed, "blooms when spring is over."

"That is like you."

She wondered how near he was to making love. The outward signs of his moods were still largely unfamiliar to her.

"Do you remember reading about the roses of Paestum?" she said, changing the subject.

"Yes. . . . They seem to be gone."

"The place was covered with roses once, I suppose. . . . Don't you feel it is queer, for us to be sitting here quietly like this, in the middle of the old city?"

He examined his feelings and discovered no sense of queerness.

"You're bound to be on the site of something or other in this country," he said.

She laughed. "Don't be commonsensical. . . . That's your Toryism coming out, isn't it?"

"No."

"Yes, it is. If you had any imagination, you would feel it was wonderful to be here, with the memories of

all the old Greeks round about us, all their flowers and their games and their beautiful way of life."

He shifted his position. The temple stones were not the softest cushion in the world.

"They had their day," he agreed indifferently. Then: "Will you let me write to you when I go back?"

She regarded him with indulgence. How like a Greek he himself was! Antinous . . . that perfect profile. . . . And yet he was, *au fond*, quite a usual sort of person. He hadn't much sense of the poetry of things. The past was over for him, as it was for all the impercipient majority she lived out her life with.

"Why do you want to write to me?" she said. "We haven't much in common."

Both question and comment were indiscreet. They might easily have provoked a declaration of passion. She was half-conscious that, at that moment, she would not have minded much if they had. But the moment passed.

"You've been so good to me," he said gravely. "I should like to keep in touch with you."

She almost laughed. What an odd boy he was! What a phrase to use!

"Will you let me write?" he pressed.

"If you like."

"And you will write to me too?"

"Yes."

A frown gathered on his forehead. "I'm not a good letter-writer," he confessed. "I'm afraid you'll think my letters pretty poor things."

"Don't you write to a good many people?"

"Only my mother."

She pondered on the possible origins of the honour

he was apparently doing her by thus assuming the burden of a new correspondence. Whatever they were, she was touched by them. She wanted to run her fingers through his beautiful fair hair, to have him always looking at her with his long beautiful eyes: and at the same time she bitterly called herself a fool. It would have been better if Flanders had never brought him to the villa that afternoon six weeks ago. . . . She reflected with amazement that six weeks ago she had never known Norton, had hardly heard his name. And now—

"Don't neglect your mother to write to me, will you?" she said aloud, rather brusquely.

He made a vague, masculine sound which she accepted as his assurance on this point.

"When must you go back?" she said.

"When I'm sent for."

"You don't know when that will be?"

He shrugged. "It might be to-morrow."

She let that sink in. "I shall miss you," she said. The second after, she was vexed with herself. Her impulsive tongue was always getting her into silly, unnecessary scrapes. He would think she was throwing herself at him. In a panic she began to talk of other things—of England, her house at Mortlake, the future. . . . By degrees she retrieved at length her old conception of their relationship, the comfortable conception of a woman past her first youth, a woman in society, taking an interest in a young man of good family who is on the point of making his *début* in the world. It wasn't entirely satisfying, this rôle; she wasn't sure that she played it well, or that he took it very seriously: but it was safe. . . .

They discussed his career.

"Of course," she said, "you won't stay in the militia much longer."

He didn't know about that. "It depends on the War."

"Oh, the War will be over in a few months." (Lady Sheen was a Whig, and Whigs talked that way in 1794.)

"I suppose," he said without enthusiasm, "a place will be found for me."

"A *place*? Do you mean—some government sinecure?"

"Yes. You know the sort of thing—stroll down to some office or other twice a month to sign papers."

She was shocked. "But—Norton!"

"What?"

"You *can't* do that."

"Yes, I can. Pitt would manage it for my father, I'm sure."

"But—is that all you want to do with your life?"

"I don't know. . . . When I was at Christ Church, there was a man called Trevivian. A few of us made up a sort of club, with Trevivian as our president. We were all going to do great things in politics when we left——"

"Well?"

"Well, I've been wasting my time since then, that's all."

She looked at him through half-closed eyes. He badly needed a direction. If nobody took him in hand, he would drift. He would become a decorative man about town, a fine, ornate man with nothing in him. Like a pretentious palace that is all façade.

"What does your father think?" she said gently.

"Nobody ever knows what he thinks."

"Your mother?"

He slashed half-heartedly at a persistent fly.

"Mother's a dear," he said, "but she *nags* so."

Lady Sheen knew those loving women who will not let their husbands and sons alone. She had always been very sorry for them, and for their menfolk too.

She made a fresh start.

"What exactly do you *want* to do with your life?"

He laughed—a little deprecating laugh. "I thought diplomacy would suit me. . . . In Trevivian's club, I was the one who was going to be Trevivian's ambassador—one of them, that is. And Flanders too, I fancy."

"You would make an imposing ambassador," she said.

The sincerity of her tone impressed him.

"You really think so?"

"Of course."

"I shall have to take a Government place if it's offered," he said regretfully.

But at that she turned on him, almost with fierceness.

"No! No! No! Do what you want to do. . . . You're a man. And a younger son. You can do whatever you choose, whatever you want to do most. If you were your father's heir it would be different. Your life would be planned for you. You couldn't get away from it. . . . But you're free. You're free to make your life something worth while. . . ." She paused, while the insects buzzed around and the long grass rustled. "You've seen my husband. You know what he is like— Well, Sheen wasn't always like that. Really, he wasn't bad. Only weak. And then he was the eldest son. He had nothing to do but wait for his father to die——"

Norton stared fixedly at the blue line of the sea. He wished she had not brought Sheen into this. Women were strange. Here was this woman beside him still loyal, in a groping way, to a man like Sheen—or loyal, at any rate, to her own memories of him.

"Susan says I'm weak," he said aloud.

"Susan?"

"My sister."

"You must show her she's wrong."

"That's all very well."

"Promise me you will try."

He laughed, and walked across to where the asphodel blooms wavered in the gold sunshine. Bending, he plucked four or five of the flowers, then came slowly back to where Lady Sheen was sitting, languid and elegant, dwarfed by the vast wall of the temple.

She looked up at him.

"Well?" she said.

"Why do you bother with my future?"

She grasped the nettle he had flung. "Because I like you well enough to care what happens to you."

He considered this. At last,

"You sha'n't be ashamed of me," he said quietly.

He was still holding the little bunch of asphodel. Abruptly, he stooped and placed the flowers in her lap.

"Will you keep them? To remind you of this afternoon?"

She nodded. Her heart ached, and she yearned to take his face between her hands and kiss it. She had a desperate feeling of being near to tears.

"Are they all for me?" she managed to say.

"Yes."

"But you will have nothing to remind you?"

"I shall never need anything to remind me," he said.

From round the corner of the temple came the sound of English voices. The afternoon was nearly over. The hillside was rendering back to life its tired pleasure-seekers. Paestum was practically over.

Norton, kneeling beside Lady Sheen, made a sudden quick movement. . . . The next instant he was walking off along the front of the temple in the direction of the advancing voices. She heard him call out: "Hello, where have you people been burying yourselves?"

She could hardly believe, so swiftly had it happened, that for five seconds he had held her in his arms and kissed her lips. . . .

§ VII

That evening at Salerno, and driving back to Naples next day, she hardly saw him. He seemed to keep out of her way deliberately. On the whole, she was not sorry. Something, something vital, had happened. She wanted time to think it over.

Norton, too, needed a breathing-space. He had been unwise. The old Greeks, perhaps, had been to blame. They had got into his blood. . . . Well, it was done now. He did not regret it.

At his hotel there was a note in Flanders' writing and a letter from his mother. He saw the English postmark as something ominous. It was inevitable that the "long leave" should come to an end very soon. He glanced rapidly down the sheet. . . . Yes. That was it. He had to go back at once.

He opened Flanders' note, a very brief and dramatic missive, from which Norton gathered that Flanders

and Lady Cheddon, with Flanders' man and Lady Cheddon's maid, had left Naples the night before. They expected to go to England. Would Norton, with the money enclosed, be good enough to pay a few outstanding accounts that in the hurry of departure, etc., etc.

It was stuffy in the room. He opened the window, letting the noise of the street swirl in. . . . Love. The loves of men and women. Flanders and Lady Cheddon running away together, flying to England and in the face of the law. It was courageous, at least. . . . Down below, in the crowd, somebody was playing on a guitar—not *Addio, Napoli*, but something cursedly like it.

He closed the window again. . . . *Addio, Napoli*. . . .

Sacks entered, from the bedroom. Which coat would my lord wear this evening?

Norton considered. "Get my uniform out," he said.

The last time he would wear it, in Naples. Better not loiter. Better to leave to-morrow, if it could be arranged. He took out his mother's letter, re-reading it carefully.

Sacks appeared again. The uniform was laid out. And there was a cold bath all ready.

"Get a carriage round in about a couple of hours," Norton told him. "And start packing up as soon as you like. . . ."

A very gay company foregathered at the villa that evening. Lord Sheen was back from Rome and full of jokes in his best vein. Nearly everybody was touching the Flanders-Cheddon episode with dirty fingers. Lady Sheen, her tired bright eyes ringed with dark circles, held out as long as she could, and Norton managed to get a few words alone with her before she retired. . . .

"But not *to-morrow?*" she verified. "You needn't leave *to-morrow?*"

"Yes—to-morrow."

She looked at him for a moment impenetrably, then glanced away. Finally with an air of small-talk:

"I had no idea you were due to leave so soon. . . . Is there any home news in your mother's letter?"

He considered vaguely whether there was. One item he found he did recollect.

"You remember my speaking of that man Trevivian—at Oxford? He's just entered the Commons, you know. And he made a great speech in the House the other night."

They smiled gravely and with understanding at one another; and he heard her whisper, so lightly that it might have been a sigh:

"You too . . . for me. . . ."

Book II

THE REIGN OF LADY SHEEN

CHAPTER I

AFTER NAPLES

§ I

AND so Norton left the Bay of Naples, which indeed he never saw again until, as an old man travelling about in a vain search for health, he revisited the place—"another picturesque ruin," flippant young people said, "come to join the rest". He was seen, one day during that June of 1845, sitting quite alone under the portico of one of the temples at Paestum, the whole of the summer's afternoon. A flippant young person spoke to him kindly, trying not to be superior and condescending to the old boy—for, the young people agreed, he was a nice old boy, as old boys went. But he had not answered, had not seemed to hear. He was, of course, very deaf then.

It is not, however, with that fragile, deaf old man that I am concerned now, but with the young Lord Norton Fitzwarren who, accompanied by divine, imperishable memories and the human and perishable Sacks, came deviously back to England fifty years before. I am concerned to follow him to Stone, where he paid his respects to his parents, gave them the Authorized Version of his Italian holiday, and saw Susan; from there to Plymouth Barracks and the French prisoners; then onward into the thick of the London world. . . .

At Stone, his mother took him into a corner and confided to him that "they hoped very soon to be able to make an announcement about Susan".

Norton looked rather vacant, as though his mother might have been suggesting that Susan was to receive the Freedom of some town or other. His own affairs had lately left very little room in his mind for the consideration of his sister's.

"Announcement?" he queried.

"Yes, indeed. . . . Of course, you must say nothing yet. But it is practically certain that Hemingby will speak. He was most attentive during the season."

Light dawned upon Norton.

"Oh, I see. You mean Susan's caught a man!"

"Norton! Norton!"

"Sorry, mother. Susan's expression, not mine."

Lady Stone sighed. "I am afraid Susan is as free in her way of speech as ever. Still"—she brightened visibly—"now that she is likely to be married——"

That, in Lady Stone's mind, could hardly fail to change her daughter's make-up, to eradicate her perversity of disposition, her tendency to be slangy and to use swear-words—all the things her mother did not understand.

"Which Hemingby is it?" Norton asked.

"The Honourable Porter Hemingby."

"The eldest son, is that?"

"Oh, of course."

Norton only knew his sister's suitor by reputation—a quiet-living, unfashionable man he was supposed to be, ten years older than Susan. He wondered how it would "work".

"So that only leaves Gussy," he said cheerfully.

Lady Stone agreed that that did leave Augusta. Her tone seemed to suggest a fear that Augusta might be left altogether, if nothing turned up in the next few

years. But she was too loyal to her daughter to say this aloud.

"Of course," she repeated, "we must keep everything quiet until Hemingby speaks."

Norton promised silence. Next morning as he was walking in the park with Susan she said:

"I suppose mother told you."

"About the—forthcoming nuptials?"

"About Hemingby. He asked me at a ball, you know—the last of the season. He's not bad. I told him I should require time to consider the matter. So he said he took that as an acceptance. He said he was going to see his father about it straightway."

"What did you say?"

"I told him his assumption was a premature delivery."

Norton looked down at her sharply. "Silly little fool. . . . I suppose you shocked him."

She shrugged. "He did blush a bit."

"And you haven't heard from him since?"

"No. He'll come round in time. . . . I shouldn't be surprised if I decided to take him after all."

Norton frowned judicially at some grazing cattle.

"Do you—love Hemingby?"

"Of course not."

"Well then?"

Susan slackened her step. "You don't suggest I should marry for love, do you?"

"Certainly."

"And be some man's slave? No thanks."

They went on in silence for a few minutes.

"You'll be sorry one day," he said at last.

"Sorry—why?"

"You'll find somebody you really do love."

"Bosh!" said Susan. "I'm willing to be faithful to my husband. . . . My tastes don't run to men, anyway. Too much bother. . . . And I'll give him an heir to the Barony if he wants one. But beyond that I mean to live my own life—like the Duchess of Belgravia without the gush and the lovers. . . ." Her thought took a new turn. "By the way," she added, "somebody was telling me in London that they had seen you at Naples."

He enquired with affected casualness what it was that her informant had told her.

Susan surveyed her brother with an innocent and virginal eye.

"The person said," she remarked gently, "that you were getting on very well with Lady Sheen."

The sound of the name gave him a faint, perceptible thrill. He badly wanted to tell Susan all about everything. But in the end he decided not to. Susan was so damnably indiscreet. The pleasure of confessional must suffer postponement.

"I did see Lady Sheen fairly often," he admitted. And then, with a confidential air: "As a matter of fact she rather took me under her wing. . . ."

En famille that evening—his last before going on to Plymouth—Susan broke a general silence with:

"Oh, Norton, was it nice under Lady Sheen's wing?"

The Marquis, who was growing hard of hearing, exclaimed: "What's that? Whose wing?" Augusta looked up blankly from her needlework. Lady Stone put on her indeterminate, slightly offended air, as though she had by chance overheard an indelicate joke.

Inwardly cursing Susan, Norton had to make up some story in which he had been dragged reluctantly round Naples by the importunities of the Sheens, who

would not leave him alone for an instant. "In common politeness," he explained, "I had to accept a good many of their invitations."

He was conscious of an atmosphere of scepticism, and it goaded him to a tentative candour.

"I didn't dislike Lady Sheen," he added boldly. "I should say she was nothing like the Duchess."

His mother coughed. A slight shiver appeared to pass across her shoulders.

"Would you mind closing the window, Augusta," she said.

Augusta rose obediently.

§ II

Susan was married in the following June—to the Honourable Porter Hemingby.

The progress of the affair, its crises and fluctuations and troubled courses, Norton gleaned mainly from his mother's letters. At one time it was: "I am afraid I spoke too soon to you about Susan. We have heard nothing from the Hon. P. H." Then: "Whatever do you think? Papa had the most beautiful letter from the Hon. P. H. about Susan." But a week or so later: "I really do not know what to think about S. She has actually *refused* the Hon. P. . . ."

Enlightenment came from Susan herself.

"I expect you have heard about Hemingby," she wrote. "As a matter of fact, everything was going swimmingly when he suddenly started talking to me about the duties of wives. I sent him off with his tail between his legs."

Two months passed. At length, from Lady Stone: "I am more pleased than I can say, to tell you that all is right again between S. and the Hon. P." A short

note was enclosed from Susan: "Dear Norton, I am to be married. He sits up and begs nicely now.—SUSAN."

It was a quiet wedding. The best weddings were all quiet then, the vulgarities of Hanover Square being still in the womb of time.

Six weeks later Norton saw his sister at a ball, during one of his visits to London from Plymouth. She greeted him characteristically:

"Hello, Norton. I didn't know Lady Sheen was coming to-night."

(The Sheens had returned to England some time previously.)

"Don't be so pained," she added. "You look like mother treating people to silent scorn."

"You are indiscreet," he told her.

"Nonsense. I only repeat what everybody is saying. I've never even seen your conquest."

Then abruptly swerving, she whispered: "By the way, look out for the heir to the Barony. The Last of the Fighting Hemingbys."

"Really?"

She nodded. "Look, here's the last but one coming."

The Honourable Porter Hemingby, academic, rather bilious, with a thoughtful and intelligent air, was advancing towards them, talking to a lady in blue. The lady was rather tall, and thin-faced, with bright, languishing eyes under strongly marked brows—rather a surprising, unusual creature.

"Who's that with Porter?" Susan said.

Norton equivocated. "The lady, you mean?"

"Yes."

Pausing a moment to get his effect and also to enjoy a certain odd proprietary air, he replied:

"That's Lady Sheen!"

§ III

Plymouth, after Naples, was infernally distasteful. The ancient, picturesque town, that had formerly been an extremely adequate place on the whole, seemed now incomprehensibly dull, though it was actually more full of gaiety than ever before. Balls, dinners, routs—there was no end to them. The place was crowded with soldiers—not militiamen only but bona fide regiments of the line as well, hanging about on transports in the harbour, bound for they knew not where. Dashing, impudent devils the young regular officers were, content to enjoy life as it passed, caring very little for length of days—which, truth to tell, not many of them were destined to know, seeing that they mostly died soon after of divers tropical diseases in the West Indies.

One of them took over Mrs. Courtis.

Norton left Mrs. Courtis severely alone for some time after his return. All that was over and done with. He had finished with women like that. And then, and then—— Letters that should have come, or at least might have come, from Naples, did not come. He couldn't altogether attribute it to the accidents of the sea, since other people seemed to have got letters from friends out there. He worried. Had Lady Sheen been just amusing herself with him? The disintegrating thought ate its way into his mind, nagging like a toothache at his self-esteem. And one afternoon, one depressing autumn afternoon, when the air was harsh and the sky a comfortless sheet of blank white paper, he found his way again to the house of Mrs. Courtis.

He knocked. Her maid—an official who was maid or

cook or anything else, as occasion required—regarded him with non-committal composure.

No, she was very sorry, Mrs. Courtis was out. . . . No, she could not say how soon she would be back. . . . Yes, certainly, she would tell the mistress that he had called.

He walked away with head high, looking straight before him, and so he did not see that the curtain of an upstairs window was drawn aside a few inches, and that for a moment a pair of pretty eyes watched his broad retreating back with an ambiguous, possibly half-regretful expression. When, however, he met Mrs. Courtis out walking next day, escorted by a buckish young captain from one of the transports, he understood how things were, bowed stiffly, and forgot them—so far, that is, as one ever entirely forgets a woman one has made love to. . . .

And, that week, he was rewarded. Lady Sheen wrote him a longish letter, full of expressions of friendship. Best of all, she was coming to England.

That, quite finally, was the end of Mrs. Courtis. He ought to have been grateful to her for having (albeit unwittingly) safeguarded his constancy at the expense of her own. But he wasn't grateful. As I say, he just forgot her.

The Sheens took a house in Devonshire for the winter, not so near Plymouth that Norton could visit very frequently, but near enough to make an occasional visit a matter of no insuperable difficulty. The world might wonder why the Sheens had returned to England. If it did, it was told that Lord Sheen had to keep an eye on his Irish estates. And if the world demanded why, in all England, Devonshire should be chosen, the reason was obvious. The mild south-west was good for

Lady Sheen's weak chest. Whether the world, in its infinite wisdom, accepted these explanations without reserve is another matter.

Sometimes, during these visits of five or six hours long, she would reproach him for leaving his work to come and see her. She would be at the door of the lonely house on Tor Bay as he dismounted, clearly glad to have him come, but feeling also the necessity to chide.

"Again?" she would say. Then, as his face fell:

"Come in out of the cold, won't you?"

"Don't you like me to come?" he asked, knowing what the reply would be. And the reply always came: "Of course I like you to come. I only wondered how you managed to get away."

He shrugged. "Other men have to take my duty, of course."

"That's just it," she said. . . .

Afterwards, when he had removed the soilure of travel and she was showing him some drawings she had made, she abruptly returned to the subject:

"Don't the other officers get leave of absence?"

"Yes, of course."

"As much as you?"

He admitted that he got more than most of his brother officers did.

"Because you're Lord Norton Fitzwarren?" she pressed.

"Yes."

He made the acknowledgment with such perfect naturalness that she laughed.

"I don't see anything funny about that," he said, slightly put out.

"No, of course you don't. That's what's so funny."

He frowned. "I'm afraid I'm out of my depth."

"You need *democratising*," she said.

He merely smiled his superior, tolerant little smile that long ago Rookwith had so disliked.

"You do," she repeated.

"I don't think so," he countered.

"Personally," he added, as though this closed the discussion, "I can't bear a democrat."

That "Can't bear" was an affectation of his just then, a phrase perpetually on his lips. His mother had scolded him about it. And Lady Sheen had noticed it unfavourably.

"There's such a lot you can't bear, Norton," she said. "I really lose count. . . . I suppose you can't bear Lord Norton Fitzwarren being treated exactly like Captain Jackson or Major Tompkins——"

He flushed. "I didn't say that," he retorted.

"That's what you think though."

He was silent, feeling sorry for himself and wondering why she chose to be so beastly to-day. As though these questions of social position mattered one straw between friends.

"You're rather a Jacobin, aren't you?" he said ruefully at last.

"Not really. . . . I'm not such a democrat and you're not such an aristocrat as we pretend."

He perceived a break in the clouds. "Then we needn't talk politics any more?"

"All right. I won't try to corrupt the purity of your Toryism again."

"I hate disagreeing with you."

"So do I with you."

"Why can't you be a proper common-sense Tory?"

"Propriety of conduct never was my forte, Nor-

ton." She regarded him ironically. "Besides, why can't you come over to my people?"

"Your people?"

"Whigs, democrats and sinners. Some of us are quite nice."

He pretended to be shocked. "You are flippant, Lady Sheen, about serious subjects."

They both laughed.

Politely, not because he cared for such things, but because Lady Sheen had executed them, he turned back to the consideration of the drawings. . . .

§ IV

Where are they now, those drawings? Where are the sketch-books, the portfolios, the numerous landscapes and the hardly less numerous but certainly less successful "life" efforts—memorials of such endless labour, such pitiful boredom? Some of them, brown and dim, doubtless repose in the cupboards of old houses. Fire, water and changing times will have done for the rest. And no lady *qua* lady any longer considers it reasonable to sketch decaying cottages, to practise on the pianoforte, or indeed to pursue any accomplishment under the sun. On the whole I don't know that in this matter the March of Progress has taken an entirely wrong turning, though it is undoubtedly bad for drawing-masters and music-teachers. . . .

Anyhow, Lady Sheen, in her quiet house on Tor Bay, with her bad chest and her other complaints, made drawings and played the pianoforte, rode a little and walked a little, beat her husband at chess and cribbage, tended her mignonette and thought increasingly, as the days went by, of Norton.

She knew now that she loved Norton.

He had kissed her and had ran away. And he had never tried to kiss her again, had never held her hand too long or made what are known vaguely as "advances"—until lately. Lately, she was conscious that he had changed. Something had happened to him. The affair, unless she put her foot down, seemed likely to follow the time-honoured course of all such affairs.

And, so far, she had not put her foot down. She had given little taps and kicks with it, tentative shows of fighting, half-hearted postponements of the inevitable. In their talks, she was careful to keep to the frank, friendly tone of an elder sister. He would watch her, with his large, impenetrable gaze, and say nothing. And afterwards she would get a letter from him—a love-letter. She could not conceal from herself that it *was* a love-letter.

It was absurd of him. He would get her into endless difficulties. Why didn't he leave her alone? Why must he pester her so?

But she didn't burn his letters. They went into a special cedar-wood box, perpetually under lock and key. And as for his leaving her alone, she knew, when for a fortnight he did not write, that that was the last thing in the world she wanted, was even the thing she most dreaded.

It was a transitional, unsatisfactory state of affairs. Some day she would end it, one way or the other. She would have to. Meanwhile——

Meanwhile they sparred and bickered. She told him that a *Jeune homme à vingt ans* does not know his own mind; that whether he did or not, friendship was *all* she had to offer; that he was losing the best years of his life dangling after her; that there were plenty of

pretty, charming young girls at his feet (he couldn't help knowing that), and that any one of them was better suited to him than she, Henrietta Sheen, could possibly be.

He listened to it all, contesting her points at first, arguing, putting his own case; afterwards letting her words flow over his head as though he realised their insincerity.

Then for three weeks he kept away and did not write. . . .

When at last he turned up at her house again, it was an unexpected visit, without previous arrangement. He explained, rather unconvincingly, that being in the neighbourhood he had called. His face, she thought, had a little of the flaccid weariness of dissipation.

"What have you been doing with yourself?" she demanded when they were alone.

He smiled apologetically. "Gambling, drinking, late hours."

"And women, I suppose."

"No."

She knew that that must be true. He was not the lying type.

"I wish you would give up gambling."

"I can't. I'm too far gone."

"Did you lose much?"

"Nothing. I'm lucky at cards."

They were sitting in a big semi-circular bay window with a view of the long beach and the sea. Far out, a vessel was beating painfully up the Channel.

"I wish you would give it up," she repeated.

He shook his head.

"Not—not if I made it worth your while?"

He looked round slowly from his contemplation of the distant sail. His pondering eyes asked her what exactly she meant.

"I mean," she added hastily, "you promised—at Naples, you know—to work hard for me, didn't you?—to become somebody really important. . . . And gambling is bad for that. The unhealthy excitement——"

She tailed off rather lamely. There was a silence. Then, rallying her forces:

"Some time ago you wrote that you wanted a lock of my hair," she said.

"Yes."

"It was very foolish. Do you still want it?"

"More than ever."

She paused. "If I gave you one, would you promise not to gamble?"

He did not answer at once. She perceived the cautious spirit of the modern Fitzwarrens at work in him.

At length: "How long is the close season?" he demanded.

"Till you are tired of coming to see me."

He laughed shortly. "I agree," he said.

Lounging over to a pile of needle-work on the table behind them he found a pair of scissors.

"No," she said. "Not yet."

"But——"

"Not here. In London. In my boudoir at Cavendish Square. You must be put on probation first."

They looked at one another for a long, pregnant minute. In the back of each mind boats burned furiously, lighting up long stretches of the future.

CHAPTER II

THE LONDON WORLD

§ I

THE uneventful weeks of soldiering in Devonshire, the rides over the country to Tor Bay, the long talks in Lady Sheen's semi-circular window, were abruptly terminated by a summons from Stone. Norton was to fight a contested by-election for one of the boroughs on the Fitzwarren estates, the ancient and moderately enfranchised borough of Trent. The Marquis had been waiting for this opportunity. Now it had presented itself and Norton must take it. The earlier a young man sat in the Commons, the better it was for him.

Norton obeyed the call. That went without saying. There was a last visit to Tor Bay, a visit that was almost a council of war. Afterwards, riding out through the gateway, he had a distinct and pleasurable sense of knighthood, of accolades and the decorative dangers of Provençal chivalry. Lady Sheen had been reading *Amadis de Gaul*. The fact had possibly coloured their conversation rather noticeably. . . .

He soon found that there were no dragons to fight at Trent. His own supporters were, in fact, much more trouble to him than the Opposition candidate. In the end, he surrendered himself into their hands. Inexperienced, not deeply interested in the whole business, he was content to be gracious to the men, attractive to the women, and judiciously vague about the War, the Powder Tax and the national food supplies—none

of which he had considered so seriously as, apparently, most of his prospective constituents had done.

It was, in the result, a closer thing than one might have supposed, considering that the Marquis owned most of the borough and that Norton was his son. But the unreformed House of Commons was far from being the regiment of hirelings its reformers would have had us believe. And in this particular instance it was probably Norton's manner, his reassuring, prudent, agreeable bearing, that kept the seat, rather than the hereditary Fitzwarren interest.

The incident—for at the time it was no more important than that—left Norton very much as it found him. Like most natural Tories, he had never formulated to himself his political creed, and he never did so later; he mistrusted the dubious warfare of politics; and he had no illusions regarding his own senatorial capacities.

But being a Member meant living for much of the year in London, and thereafter Plymouth shared him with Westminster. He was not called upon to resign his commission—that was amicably arranged between the Marquis and the Colonel of Militia—and in fact he did continue, intermittently, to help guard the increasing numbers of French prisoners at Plymouth Barracks. The Fitzwarren town house in Whitehall, however, became his headquarters. London life claimed him more and more. And, that Spring, the Sheens moved from Devonshire to Cavendish Square. . . .

§ II

I suppose that it was about this time that Norton's real flowering began. In these years, while liberated France was groaning under a corrupt Directory and the English Navy mutinied and the whole world seemed

badly out of sorts, he evolved and consolidated—quite unconsciously—a reputation, an idea, a kind of picture of himself in the minds of his contemporaries.

He had yet to reach the splendours of his early thirties ; his dignity had not matured ; the magnificence of his person lacked the final touch, the faint suggestion of severity, of ambiguous melancholy, that only years could give : but he was already in possession of enough of his physical inheritance to render him a cause of war among endless strategic and marriageable young women.

There he was, officer of Militia, Member of Parliament, society man, born in the purple, own son to a powerful Marquis—and handsome beyond the wildest dream of virgin or matron, with a gentle seriousness in his manner, an unassuming princely air that made all other men seem fussy and underbred.

Of course he was an impecunious younger son, and (*sotto voce*) people said he was devoted to Lady Sheen. But a little time, a little influence, might remedy the impecuniosity—and also, the marriageable young women hoped, the devotion as well.

Meanwhile he moved from dinner-table to dinner-table, from the Park to the House, from the opera to the theatre, from the boudoir to the card-table—always cool, imperturbable, perfectly under control ; always, in his quiet way, enjoying himself hugely.

Intermittently, as I say, he took a turn at the French prisoners ; several times a year he visited Stone ; at the proper seasons he stayed with friends at country houses, went hunting and shot : but his centre of gravity was London and Lady Sheen.

That episode of the lock of hair belonged to the past now. People remarked, more or less openly, how

improved Lady Sheen's health was, now that she had an interest in life. Her name was coupled with Norton's as plainly as, for example, the Prince's was with Lady Jersey's. It was, of course, nobody's business but Lord Sheen's, and he had other matters to attend to. In any case, he had never conceived that marriage implied the protection of your wife's virtue from handsome younger sons.

Among his other associations Norton even became a member of the Belgravia House set—not, however, a full member, not at all a subscriber to their pseudo-democratic notions, their frothy politics and their flabby moralities: rather a sort of visiting member, an honoured guest through his relation with Lady Sheen. They were an odd crowd, in his opinion, and past their heyday; but their parties were still the jolliest in London. There was nothing at all like them among the rather strait-laced Tories he had been brought up with.

So, at Belgravia House and elsewhere the years slipped by. Years when the eighteenth century, contemptuous of its successors, was passing away; years of apparently futile war abroad, unrest and disintegration at home; years—for Norton and for Lady Sheen—of serene happiness, the like of which neither ever knew again.

It is perhaps a mistake to suppose, as people do (as Norton's mother, for example, did), that a liaison is necessarily a source of mental uneasiness, social handicaps, private deceits and disgusts. Some undoubtedly are so—the purely physiological sort always. But no affair of Lady Sheen's could be purely physiological—there was too much of the intellectual in her for that. Passionate moments, yes . . . but the

deep fount of her love, hitherto almost a pool unstirred, was not lightly blown to fury. Most of the time, it was enough for both of them that he should see her at balls and plays, that he should talk over his impressions with her, emptying his mind, thinking aloud. She was older than he, and not so *posé*; and the impact of her volatility went far to save his temperament from the complacent abyss of dullness.

The queer, superficially ill-assorted partnership went on. All the world wondered. The Marchioness of Stone, after a brief assault upon her son's volition, retired discomfited and a little puzzled. She had always heard and believed that these disgraceful amours demoralised young men. And, in the face of all probability, Norton was being actually *improved* by this one. Ultimately she decided to let matters take their course. After all, the affair would almost certainly not last long. And in any case the unpalatable truth was that, sanction or no sanction, she could not diminish its duration by ten minutes.

§ III

One of the smaller rooms at Cavendish Square was always referred to as the music-room. It housed a pianoforte and a harpsichord to justify its title, but actually Lady Sheen used it as a sort of study, whither she retired to write letters, to read—sometimes merely to sit and think, quietly, while the blue dusk fell over the square outside. The household knew that it was pre-eminently *her* room.

Norton usually went there at once whenever he called at the house. It was exquisitely familiar to him, a harbour he constantly looked forward to, an oasis of calm reflections in the march of London life.

Always, while the servant went to fetch candles, he would sit for a moment at the piano and strum the first bars of that wild haunting Neapolitan air, that *Addio, Napoli* thing, that he had first heard on the loggia the time they had talked together of love and friendship.

It was a signal. He knew that, almost before he had finished, the door would open and she would be with him. He would turn round, with one hand still on the keyboard, and catch the whisper of silk drapery frou-frouing downstairs . . . then her pale figure at the door, hesitating there in the gloom, till he spoke.

§ IV

In those days Belgravia House in Piccadilly was on its last legs—or, at any rate, its penultimate legs. The Duchess of Belgravia was no longer the woman she had once been. Her breeding, indeed, remained; but her beauty (such as it had been) was going; and her abundant vitality was gone. She gambled and made love and played with her life as furiously as ever, so far as the superficial observer could judge. Only those who knew her as intimately as did her sister, Lady Sheen, were aware that the fury was artificial, the gaiety a mere desperate echo of the spontaneous laughter that had filled the house in the 'eighties.

Norton found her attentive, sometimes embarrassingly so. Once she praised his good looks in conversation with a neighbour, loudly, so that the praise should not escape him. But he soon found that she had no designs on him—it was just natural silliness.

Then there was the Duke. The Duke played whist, and Norton played whist with him. That was really

all there was to say about the Duke. It was hardly surprising that his wife had found amusement—and more than amusement—elsewhere.

Lady Sophia Frome, the Duke's mistress, who also acted as the Duchess' companion and general manager of the hospitality of Belgravia House, was a permanent resident there. She was clever and devoted—to all appearances—to the Duchess. She had two children by the Duke, as against the Duchess who had had three. Or perhaps it was the other way round. Nobody ever knew for certain. In such an odd house, all sorts of mistakes were liable to occur.

The Mauldeths, who lived nearly opposite the Fitzwarren town house in Whitehall, frequently decorated the dinners in Piccadilly: Lord Mauldeth, fat, good-natured, a nonentity who, Norton gathered, was some sort of functionary "about the Prince"; and Lady Mauldeth, a still lovely, scheming creature, deeply ambitious, who also had, it seemed, very probably served the Prince as well, when she had been younger and her husband not a peer. The Prince himself turned up now and then, full of wine and animal spirits when he arrived, even fuller when he departed. Not that Wales ever overstepped the mark of good manners nowadays; he had been drunk too many times to let it make him forget himself. The night when he had tried to take old Lord Galloway's false teeth out was long ago. He had been young then; possibly drink had been stronger; and certainly his capacity for it had been less accurately ascertained.

Of course there were the celebrities—Charles James Fox, Richard Brinsley Sheridan, one or two other lesser lights. No dinner-table at Belgravia House was ever entirely furnished unless one of the regular

wits was present. Not that Fox was a mere wit. Norton rather liked Charles Fox—one of those gentle fire-eaters who will applaud the murder of some poor devil of a king, and mend a child's broken toy, all in a morning. Charles Fox invariably asked kindly after the Marquis and chatted about Trentshire, which he knew.

Next day, in the music-room at Cavendish Square, the conversation would come up for review.

"I had no idea he was like that," Norton said thoughtfully.

Lady Sheen supposed that Norton's mother had given him his previous ideas on the point.

"Yes." He considered. "She always lived a rather shut-in life, you see. She never *met* people of liberal opinions much. . . . Not," he added hastily, "that I subscribe to their opinions for an instant."

She laughed. "It doesn't matter. In England, if you want to, you can be very good friends with people whose political views make you sick. . . ."

And because Norton was disposed to agree with this he continued to go to Belgravia House, in spite of the most solemn warnings from his mother.

Lady Stone was, however, passing through a belatedly formative stage of her development. Norton's social success in the fashionable world, which might well have spoiled him, had plainly not done so; his liaison had even done him good; Lady Sheen, whom she had met, proved to be unexpectedly sensible, and, moreover, sent her long news-letters when she was at Stone and Norton—as usual—had had no time to write; and finally that Trevivian person, whom Norton had unfortunately been so friendly with at Oxford, cropped up again in no less surprising a situation than

the pocket of Mr. Pitt. It was all most disturbing. Her world, which had always been black and white, everywhere showed an alarming tendency to lose those clear and reassuring contrasts. The black ran into the white, and *vice versa*, in all manner of places. If there was one idol (always excepting her family) in Lady Stone's life, that idol was Mr. Pitt, the Prime Minister, the living embodiment of all that she had hoped Norton would be, and that Norton had, so far, shown so few signs of being. That young Trevivian should be a protégé of Mr. Pitt was astounding, but it was also an unquestioned passport to her sympathy. Deliberately, with a blind eye upon the past, she wrote to Norton: "I hear young Trevivian is making quite a name for himself. What a pity you dropped him after leaving Oxford!"

To which she in due course received a reply: "I didn't drop Trevivian. He dropped me. But he has picked me up again lately. I often meet him at the Duchess of Belgravia's. . . ."

Lady Stone paused, pursed her lips thoughtfully, and examined a succession of mental pictures. Life was really very complicated. . . . The white always running into the black.

She sighed and, returning to Norton's letter, read to the end.

§ v

Trevivian's position at Belgravia House was anomalous. He was now an Under-Secretary at the Foreign Office, an avowed follower of Mr. Pitt. It seemed that he had only to keep on following Mr. Pitt in order to ensure his future, for, whichever side he chose, he was regarded as a coming man. And the least well-informed of observers knew that to be a protégé of Mr. Pitt

was to stand very near the throne—while to be a junior member of the feeble and discredited Whig Opposition was to be simply wasting your time.

Nevertheless, Trevivian kept going to Belgravia House and the Duchess kept deceiving herself into the belief that he was coming back to the good Whig fold.

The first time Norton met him there Trevivian was standing alone regarding a dim and smoky portrait of some ancestor of the Duke's. Norton took him by surprise.

"Why, Fitzwarren!" he exclaimed, obviously pleased.

They shook hands.

"The second Duke, I believe, isn't it?" Norton said.

"That picture? I couldn't say."

"You have no need of ancestors, eh?"

Trevivian's keen dark face became thoughtful. "On the contrary, Fitzwarren, I constantly feel the lack of them." Then, at Norton's politely incredulous glance: "The political world, my dear fellow, is still pretty well bounded by the social world. People look on me as a wild bird. They like to make use of me, but they don't care to make me one of themselves. . . . Because, of course, I'm *not* one of them."

"You've done well enough."

"I might be worse off, of course."

"What's the matter then?"

Trevivian's gesture indicated that, in his view, the matter was as plain as daylight. "Look at Burke. He wasn't one of the ruling families. And so he never got more than a junior office. They made use of him. They knew he was invaluable to them. But they didn't make him First Minister. . . . It's easy enough, you see, to get as far as I have got already, and even farther,

on your own merits. It's damnably more difficult to get to the top. . . .

"Besides," he added, "I'm poor. That's a crime in itself."

He glanced curiously at Norton. "What brings you into the Den of Thieves, if I may ask?"

"They give the best suppers in London."

"True. You come often?"

"I expect to."

This was at the beginning of the affair with Lady Sheen, when Norton was still a comparative stranger at the famous meals. Trevivian gave Norton another shrewd and speculative look.

"What do you *do* nowadays, Norton?" he asked.

The use of his Christian name was a little unexpected. Norton had thought Trevivian had finally dropped him long ago.

"I play about in the Militia," he said. "And I was elected for Trent a little while ago."

"Indeed! I never see you in the House."

"Probably because I rarely go."

Trevivian was silent. The years, Norton considered, had subdued him. He did not fly at you quite in his old manner. But the dark fire of his ambition, that had burned so vigorously at Peckwater, showed no signs of approaching extinction. Norton could see, from various ancient and familiar signs, that Trevivian regarded his light-hearted avoidance of the House of Commons with disapproval.

"There's plenty of time for me," he excused himself.

Trevivian shook his head slowly.

"Yes, there is," Norton affirmed. "And, you see, I don't care for the House. Making speeches isn't my forte. I'm really waiting for my chance in diplomacy."

"Diplomacy?" Trevivian laughed shortly. "You were going to be one of my ambassadors, weren't you—in the old days?"

"Yes."

"We were very simple then!"

The Duchess came billowing towards them in the latest fashionable creation, mechanically exerting herself to produce some of the legendary charm people expected of her.

"I had no idea you two knew one another," she gushed.

"Both hard-bitten Tories, Duchess," Trevivian said familiarly.

"And both quite, quite beyond reclaiming?" She was incredibly arch.

Trevivian nodded. "Both quite."

"Is that true, Lord Norton?"

Norton was afraid so. "You see, Your Grace," he explained gravely, "my mother would never let me turn Whig."

She slapped his hand playfully, with an affectation of the girlishness that had once delighted London.

"Now you are making fun of me," she exclaimed. "You are thoroughly naughty men, both of you. Come and have some supper!"

They followed her gratefully. . . .

Afterwards they walked back to Whitehall together, talking of the past and the present in the desultory, informative fashion of old friends who have rediscovered one another, exchanging details about the men who had been used to meet in Trevivian's rooms at Oxford.

"What is Morval doing?" Trevivian said. "I see him in the House sometimes but never to speak to."

Norton couldn't give much information about his nephew. Morval, even in the family, seemed to have subsided almost entirely.

"I expect he's getting out facts or something," he added vaguely.

Then there was little Tiplady.

"He's with me at the Foreign Office," Trevivian explained.

Boreland seemed to have taken a line of his own. There were two Tory camps—the Pittite, or brilliant camp, and the rest. Boreland had thrown in his lot with the rest.

"An odd thing, even for Boreland," Norton remarked.

"I don't know. Dull men banded together are liable to be very formidable. We may not have heard the last of Friend Boreland."

Under the lamp in Whitehall they halted. Trevivian had to go back to his chambers in the Temple.

"Do you ever see Flanders?" he asked Norton tentatively.

The question was rather "out of bounds". Flanders had damned himself utterly by his elopement with Lady Cheddon. Both he and she were believed to be living quietly together in the country somewhere. They never went into society. Naturally she couldn't be received. And he, it seemed, preferred not to meet people without her.

"I was at Naples when—all that happened," Norton said.

"He was a fool."

"He loved her madly."

"I *know*. . . . One gets over that."

A pause. "You're not married or—anything, Carlos?"

"No. I told you I was poor."

"I'm in the same boat."

"You don't want to marry?"

"Not at present."

"Well, I do," said Trevivian unexpectedly. "And fairly soon."

Norton pondered. "Ancestors, I suppose," he remarked, with candour.

"Ancestors and money, Norton. Or, if not that, then money without ancestors!"

He strode off under the starlit sky, his cape blowing in the wind, towards Charing Cross and his future.

§ VI

Thenceforward, Norton saw Trevivian frequently, and not always at Belgravia House. Trevivian even came to Stone, for the inspection of the Marchioness, and made a favourable impression on that rather bewildered lady. At first she was on her guard. Trevivian was, after all, not a very well-defined person. He wasn't even "county". But his firm seat in the good graces of Mr. Pitt and the vigour with which, through his influence, Norton was now following his political career, won her over to him. She ended by confiding to him all her maternal anxieties regarding Norton's career, and, after he had left, she found various excuses to correspond with him. When he came again she felt intimate enough to give him a delicate reproof which she considered he needed.

"You and Norton go to see the Duchess too often," she told him.

He smiled tolerantly.

"Suppers with fine ladies," she added, by way of explanation, "never get a young man anywhere in the world."

Trevivian had continued to smile, turning the edge of her attack with a joke. Afterwards, Norton said:

"Did I see my mother lecturing you?"

"She was warning me."

"I thought so. Pitfalls of the young, I suppose."

Trevivian nodded. "She is a very simple-hearted lady," he said. And then: "I'm fond of your mother. Mothering is old-fashioned nowadays. There's not much mothering done at Belgravia House, for instance."

They both thought of the children of Belgravia House—the little puny boy who would be the next Duke, backward, diffident, tossed from governess to governess; the two girls, Georgiana and Anne, huddled in the shadows cast by the blaze of their mother's social glories; and the boy and girl with the bar sinister, the pledges of the Duke's affection for Lady Sophia Frome. Further off there was little Kathy, Lady Sheen's daughter, but she had, at least, the benefit of her mother's good heart and excellent intentions.

"When I marry," Trevivian said, "I shall give up dining out."

Norton let the question drop. It was a pity there was no happy mean between the Duchess type and his mother's type. Of course, Lady Sheen might be that happy mean. . . . The matter, however, wasn't distressingly urgent. In those days considerations of maternal conduct and the care of the young were pleasantly theoretical to Norton. . . .

It is at about this time that he emerges as a minor political figure.

I do not propose to lead the way into the political details which filled the minds of Norton and Trevivian

and the two or three others of the group known as "Pitt's young men". These details almost entirely occupied Norton's horizon. The significance of some small change in the Cabinet, the meaning of an ambiguous meeting at a Whig lord's house, the possibility of hostile moves against their leader—these were matters to be discussed from all sides, in every conceivable light, as Norton walked home from the House with Trevivian or sat with him at midnight in his rooms in the Temple. They were the stuff of life, the factitious interest without which nobody can find pleasure in the business of existence. And, in their way, these manœuvrings, these compromises between the splendour of statesmanlike principles and the homeliness of practical political necessities are both entertaining and instructive. But this is not the place for them. So far as novels are concerned, the politics of yesteryear have a most ancient and fishlike smell. . . .

Sometimes, they spoke in the House, these young men: Norton spoke heavily, carefully, without perceptibly attracting or offending; Morval spoke, and the House left him at it; and Trevivian spoke, rousing demons.

No audience of Trevivian's ever felt quite the same towards him at the close of his speech as at the beginning. They loved him or they hated him, for he was violent, recklessly violent. He said what was in the hearts of those who were with him, and in the secret fears of those who were against him; and he said it with a passion of sincerity that swept people away. Afterwards, a good many of those who had cheered him loudest had twitchings of repentance. It is a little disturbing, when the moment is over, to

have been swept away. Exhilaration droops and dies. . . . Trevivian, even among his supporters, was never entirely popular. A force like that—you could never be quite sure which way it might not turn.

§ VII

Morval, though ostensibly one of "Pitt's young men", was by no means as thoroughgoing as, for example, Norton was. He let it be understood that ideas interested him more than parties or men. And he rarely went about in society as Norton and Trevivian did. In particular, he never went near Belgravia House at the hours of the celebrated meals there.

So that the news of his prospective marriage to Georgiana, the Duchess' elder daughter, came to the group as something astonishing and not to be believed at secondhand. It was not merely his marrying into that dubious house that was so incredible. That, after all, was a matter of taste. But Belgravia House and its belongings were so hopelessly Whig that Morval's secession from the Pitt group must necessarily follow his acquisition of the Lady Georgiana. It was decided to interview him, and to Norton was allotted the duty. He accordingly made his way to the town house of Morval's parents in a corner of which Morval meditated alone, pending his abandonment of the state of bachelorhood.

On this particular morning Morval was reading the newspaper. He had, as was his custom, been up early, and the daily matutinal claims of his exacting self-culture were for the moment satisfied. He sat at his ease, in an armchair by a sunny window, digesting (Morval never skimmed) the morning's news.

"I hear I am to congratulate you," Norton opened, after a proper interval for preliminaries.

Morval coughed. A faint pinkness spread over his bony cheeks.

"That is so," he admitted. "Assuming," he modified, "that marriage is invariably a subject for congratulation."

Norton said he hoped they would be very happy. Morval replied that he felt certain on this point.

"She is very young," Norton suggested.

"M'yes." Morval stooped to pick up his paper which had slipped from his knee. "But she isn't an ordinary girl," he added.

Norton supposed not. There was a pause.

"We've been wondering," Norton tried delicately, "how you met her. I mean—we never see you——"

"I met her in the Park."

"In the Park?"

"Yes."

Norton considered. "I see. You met her in the Park. She was out driving, I suppose?"

Morval's expression hardened defiantly. "I'm not sure that I know what the devil it's got to do with you what she was doing."

The outburst, from Morval, was definitely exciting. Norton made deprecatory sounds intended to mollify.

"The family are naturally interested," he equivocated.

Morval rustled the newspaper. "If you promise not to say a word outside this house," he announced finally, "I'll tell you about it."

Norton agreed.

"She was running away," said Morval, with an air of quiet triumph.

"The devil she was. And you—butted in?"

No, Morval had not butted in. At least, not exactly. He proceeded to outline his romance.

About a month ago, it appeared, he had been enjoying the air in the Park, after a fierce bout in his study with the perplexing problem of Democracy *versus* Bonaparte. The problem had temporarily baffled him. He sought relief in green places.

As he wandered over the grass he had become aware of two people, a man and a girl, walking towards him. The man seemed to be making himself a nuisance to the girl, but Morval would not have acknowledged their existence on that ground alone. "I did something of the sort once," he confided, "and the young woman behaved very badly. She was annoyed with me for helping her. So I determined never to do such a thing again."

But this particular young woman, Norton gathered, had crossed deliberately to where Morval was strolling past, and had addressed him.

"You're Lord Morval, aren't you?" she had demanded.

Morval, taken off his guard, admitted as much.

"Send this man away, will you please."

The man, Norton gathered, was heavily built, which Morval was not. Breeding, however, had endowed Morval with an air of command for use in hours of crisis. The man had "slunk away".

And, by degrees, it had come out that the young lady was no other than Lady Georgiana Caversham.

"You see, Norton——" Morval became discreet and ambiguous. "Her position is very unhappy. There is that Lady Sophia Frome. . . . And then—well, it is rather a queer household altogether. The

poor girl had really started to run away that morning. If that fellow hadn't pestered her, Goodness knows what would have happened."

He reflected silently upon the strange ways of Goodness, and the incongruous agents It adopts to secure Its ends.

"All this was a month ago?" Norton insinuated.

The delicate pink again invaded Morval's cheeks.

"Yes," he confirmed. Then: "I called. The next day. . . ." Coyness overcame him. "I can't expect you to understand how I feel about Georgiana," he said.

He gazed out of the window, manifestly and absurdly happy. Norton almost envied him the absurdity of the happiness he was finding in all this.

"Her parents are agreeable?" he enquired, conversationally.

"The Duke was very nice. I thought I should have some trouble with the Duchess. It sounds silly but—I think she was rather afraid of becoming a grandmother."

Norton said gravely: "You might put some clause about that in the Marriage Settlement."

The pink suddenly shot up to the roots of Morval's hair.

"*Really*, Norton!" he said. . . .

§ VIII

The Duchess did become a grandmother, nine months and two days after the marriage of Morval to Lady Georgiana Caversham. Thereafter, the House of Commons and "Pitt's young men" saw very little of Morval. It was understood that he was putting into practice a theory of bringing up children to which

he had, in the days of his bachelorhood, devoted considerable thought. A year later another baby appeared—and then, at intervals, five or six more. The Cavershams are not constitutionally fruitful. The Dukedom has dodged about among nephews and second cousins in a most erratic fashion. So that the responsibility must be deemed to rest mainly with Morval. However this may be, he retired into the delights of private domesticity without audible complaint or reproach. Sometimes his increasing family worried him; duty called him to supervise the development of little boys when desire indicated the snugness of his study; but he never (so far as the world could see) regretted his romance. He had, after all, married the daughter of the Beautiful, Notorious Duchess; and the Duchess' grandchildren were growing up under his eye and hand, their morals safeguarded, their outlook tended and formed, magnificently free from the faintest accusation of neglect. The bent twig was becoming straight and he, Morval, was doing the straightening. An odd destiny perhaps. Outside in the world Carlos Trevivian ranged turbulently, dominating Cabinets; lesser men than Morval were doing well for themselves—men like little Tiplady, for instance; and Norton—Norton seemed likely to succeed beyond all speculation. . . . Morval returned with Christian resignation to the task of teaching his eldest boy to read—a painful and discouraging business at the best of times.

One day, when the last child had been taught to read, he would go back to politics, back to the great world, the London world. Not that he cared for the London world excessively. A quiet library was always preferable to a noisy drawing-room. But you went to the

noisy drawing-room because you didn't want to feel out of things, not because you liked it. You didn't, in your secret heart, want these other men to get all the attention. You, too, wanted to be somebody.

Well—in the world, the London world, there were odd *volte-faces*, the queerest changes of circumstance. One day—who knew?—it might be Norton who was teaching his children to read, in peaceful domestic obscurity. The wheel might yet come full circle. . . .

His wife entered, plain, aristocratic, still hardly more than a girl, visibly with child, infinitely beloved . . . Morval rose, kissed her and put the world away.

CHAPTER III

THE ANGLE OF MORTLAKE

§ I

IT was a feature of the reign of Lady Sheen that Norton's life was left quite unembarrassed by it. The liaison dominated, but not arrogantly, not exactingly. I find, indeed, in that period, a lack of definition, a want of pattern, that I cannot exorcise. Superficially they were shapeless, amorphous years, lamentably devoid of incident. It is only on closer examination that you realise the ordered development that was going on, steadily, healthily, almost (like all true development) imperceptibly.

And I see quite plainly that this quiet growth was the direct outcome of Lady Sheen's influence. He could turn to her at all times. If he did not turn to her she did not grumble at him or distract him with scenes. By subservience to the detail of his life, she determined its structure and its course.

At that time she used to live at Cavendish Square more than she liked, so as to be near him. But very often, when London grew unbearable, she would go to her villa near Mortlake, some miles out along the river. It was quite a customary villa, the sort moneyed people had built for generations on the outskirts of London—a compromise between the town-house and the country seat. You could entertain very pleasantly there, in an informal fashion, without fuss and ostentation. And, in fact, the Sheens' country "place" being in a

particularly inaccessible part of Ireland, Lady Sheen used Mortlake for all her out-of-season hospitalities.

She loved the house; she loved superintending the cutting of hay in the long field behind the kitchen gardens, regulating the disposition of dung, organizing the little school for village girls that she ran at her own expense; and she loved the nightingales there, the soft clean air that filled your lungs on an early morning ride, the french-windowed drawing-room opening on to the sunny lawn. You must imagine her, lying on the grass under the clump of cedars in a corner of the lawn reading Coxe's *Life of Sir Robert Walpole* or Lavater's book on Physiognomy. It was, you should note, significant that she did in fact lie on the grass, and not sit on a chair brought out for the purpose. The strain of impulsiveness, the necessity to surrender wholly, made her do this. Not for Henrietta Sheen the civilized artifice of a chair. She had to feel the sun-baked earth close to her, without restriction, the living complement of the bright sky and the grass and herself. Of course it frequently happened that the earth was not so sun-baked as she had supposed, and then she caught a chill.

Norton—an essentially urban creature at this period—did not often come down to Mortlake, and when he did he never lay on the grass under the cedars. Sometimes she used to play the harp to him in the drawing-room; sometimes they just sat and talked about books and people. Occasionally there were days when she seemed dull and listless, and then he would say, censoriously:

"Laudanum again last night?"

She would reply: "I had a bad pain. . . . I couldn't help it, Norton," with much humility.

"You will kill yourself one day."

She carried the war into the enemy's camp. "No sooner than you will, I suppose."

His faint, puzzled smile asked what she meant.

"Driving that curricule the way you do," she explained. "You ought not to stand up to drive. The least jolt——"

She paused. She had so often imagined him in the road, dragged along, tangled in the reins, by a startled horse; and then picked up with that perfect face, those beautiful eyes, spoilt for ever. . . .

"I wish you would give it up," she said, wistfully.

But he wouldn't promise. The curricule was a part of his masculine equipment, the life of tennis and fencing and driving that women did not understand.

"I sha'n't kill myself," he reassured her.

She looked at him. Late hours, masquerades at dawn, and the ardours of politics, were beginning to alter him. He wasn't a boy any longer. It was a *grand seigneur*, the finest of fine gentlemen who sat at her feet now. For, whatever the future might hold, he did still sit at her feet—so far. The time would come when he would have got over loving her. He would not want to kiss her any more. She told herself: "That will not matter, so long as I have his mind." But she knew in her heart that she deceived herself and that it would matter a great deal. . . .

From the background of the Mortlake villa other pictures emerge.

Once he called when she was in the midst of a musical afternoon, supported by Kathy, Anne Caversham and one or two other girls of that set. Kathy was growing into a rather grave-eyed pale slip of a girl,

with a dark glance and a habit of unexpected announcements. Norton never felt quite at his ease under that steady, incalculable gaze.

As he came through the doorway Kathy said: "Hello, Lord Norton," without enthusiasm.

Anne Caversham was seated by the great harp. She looked through the strings at him with the plain-featured, aristocratic composure of her breed. It was clear that she, too, regarded the intrusion of this impressive male adult with disfavour. The other girls, being ordinary young females in their middle teens, accorded their visitor the embarrassed adoration suitable to their years.

"We were doing 'Lady Fair'," Kathy stated, pointedly.

He besought her to ignore his unwelcome presence.

"Very well. . . . You won't take mother away for an hour, will you?"

Lady Sheen exclaimed: "Kathy, my dear." But her attempt at severity was lost. Kathy was tinkering with a violin and let the reproof pass over her. Her mother went to the pianoforte, visibly a little unhappy at this collision of her young girls and her lover.

"Now!" Kathy raised the violin. "Let's begin again!"

In the difficult moment of restarting, Anne Caversham said:

"Isn't there a bass part in 'Lady Fair'?"

Somebody discovered that there was.

"What about you, Lord Norton?" said Anne Caversham.

She eyed him where he lounged in his chair.

"I can't sing," he objected feebly.

"Never mind! Do you know the song?"

"I did once."

"There's a spare sheet over there," said Anne Caversham, with royal calm.

Lady Sheen, by the pianoforte, had an air of amusement. He gave way.

"I don't mind trying," he conceded.

Somehow or other they all managed to come in at the points fixed by the composer. And Norton turned out after all to have quite a good bass voice. When it was over, Anne Caversham favoured him with a cool, half-smiling nod of approval. He was the lion of the occasion. . . .

Another picture of that time concerns a day when Lady Mauldeth went down to Mortlake on a sick-visit. Lady Mauldeth was not given to sick-visiting. If people were ill it was, in her view, generally their own fault. So that some other reason must be discovered for this journey of hers to Mortlake. Possibly the fine morning tempted her to take a long drive; perhaps it was that her son, young Richard Langley, seemed to have fallen into something suspiciously like love with Kathy, and that she wished on this account to spy out the land: Lady Mauldeth's reasons were never easy to locate, and the real one may have been something quite different.

Lady Sheen had had one of her periodic "attacks", but, at the moment when the Mauldeth greys came to a halt outside the front door, she was practically well again; so that in due course, the visit over, she accompanied her caller through the entrance hall with the polite idea of speeding the parting guest as amiably as possible. Though it may not have been politeness only. There was little in common between

Henrietta Sheen and the beautiful, calculating mistress of Mauldeth House.

As they passed through the hall, Lady Mauldeth interrupted an acid comment of her own on some foible of a mutual friend, to look at a bust which stood in an alcove beside the great hall fireplace. For a full minute she regarded it intently.

"Smiler, surely," she said at last.

That nickname, "Smiler", was how the Belgravia House ladies among themselves always referred to Norton—when Lady Sheen was not present. It had originated in the naturally caressing quality of his eyes, and perhaps also in the affabilities of his early anxiety to be pleasant.

"Lord Norton," Lady Mauldeth corrected herself. "Isn't it?"

"Of course not."

There was an exchange of glances.

"It's a bust of Antinous," Lady Sheen explained, a trifle flustered.

The other woman smiled comprehendingly.

"I know it is, my dear Henrietta. Still, a likeness is a likeness."

Lady Sheen said nothing. She did not like this worldly creature's fingers upon the sanctities of her life. It was silly, perhaps, to have placed that thing in the hall.

"I wouldn't put any man's likeness in my house," Lady Mauldeth added. "The best of them aren't worth that. . . . Where a man and a woman are concerned, my dear, one of them always has to suffer. Sooner or later. Men generally contrive that it shall be the woman. I see to it that it is the man."

She indicated with a slight movement the perfect

Greek head on its pedestal, the half-smiling lips that so clearly recalled, to a discriminating eye, the smile of Norton Fitzwarren.

"*He* will make *you* suffer one day," she said.

"I suppose so."

"Don't let him."

Lady Sheen gave vent to a gesture of impatience. "Oh, don't you know what it is to love a man?"

Her visitor gazed at the bright rectangle of sunshine framed by the front door, the green-gold lawn, the greys pawing the gravel of the drive.

"I don't think I do," she said slowly. . . .

Old, faded pictures: the music in the drawing-room, the big young man singing the bass part of "Lady Fair" among those slim, muslin-gowned girls, with the pale afternoon light drifting in at the long windows; and the bust of the Greek youth, on its pedestal in an alcove of the dim-lit hall, set there to remind a lady of her beloved bondage——

✓ All gone now. The villa at Mortlake is a private hotel; Anne Caversham's harp is in a museum; the bust has disappeared—probably in fragments, at the hands of some careless Victorian servant.

I suppose that the bondage, in other hearts, remains.

§ II

One of those autumns Lady Sheen and Kathy took a small house at Margate. A doctor had recommended sea-bathing for an ailment of Lady Sheen's, and the place appeared to be, on merely general grounds, a peaceful enough retreat for a little time.

But Margate proved to be less peaceful than the doctor had supposed. Lady Sheen, in accordance

with their custom, told Norton all about it when she returned to Mortlake. He had been very glad to see her again. Hanging limp in his arms, she was conscious of exultation and regret: exultation, that he still desired her; regret, that their love must finish, that they could not, in the nature of things, go together to the end. She clung to him with desperate urgency, so that he looked at her wondering, for she was not a physically passionate woman.

Answering the question in his eyes:

"I was thinking of those soldiers at Margate," she said.

He waited for her to continue.

"There were such a lot of them," she explained a little breathlessly, "all embarking in transports for Holland. Their wives had come to say good-bye. Some of the women had babies. . . . I couldn't help thinking of you—and me."

"You think I ought to volunteer?"

"Oh, *no*, Norton!" She was absurdly emphatic. "Don't ever do that, will you?"

"Why not?"

"You might be killed."

"Some of those poor devils have been killed since you saw them go."

She withdrew from his hold. They looked at each other, she from her chair, he downwards from the corner of a table.

"That's just it," she said slowly. "You see—those women were losing everything. . . . I felt ashamed. Because, if I lost you, there would still be books and society and Mortlake. I should have something left. It seemed unfair. I was coming back to you and home and all my comforts. And the trans-

ports were stripping those poor souls bare. They were going back to—nothing.”

His little frown indicated to her that he thought these sentiments over-strained and unsound.

“You’ll stay in England, won’t you, though?” she pressed.

He shrugged. “I don’t know. With things as they are——”

There was no need to finish the sentence. “Things”, undoubtedly, were bad. Nobody seemed able to defeat the armies of Bonaparte; the Allies had for years been fighting half-heartedly, intent on mutual jealousies, lacking one clear aim, merely jockeying for places in what they hoped would be the division of the ancient Kingdom of France; Austria was on her knees; the new American President, Jefferson, was pro-French; and the red flag of mutiny had flown over the Navy at Sheerness, a shameful symbol of internal decay, in the full light of the sun and in time of war.

“Don’t you think——” She smoothed a crease out of her dress. “Don’t you think it would be enough just to stay in the Militia?”

“And go on playing at soldiers?” he smiled.

“Because,” she said, “there’s no *point* in this war. If you were a Whig you would see that.”

“Suppose Bonaparte landed on the South Coast——”

“What nonsense!”

“And the French came to Mortlake,” he persisted. “You know what happened in Lombardy. And a good many of those women were nuns.”

She informed him coldly that he, like most men, allowed his mind to dwell over-much upon disgusting details; and that, in any case, she didn’t believe all

those reports. She thought they were invented and spread by the Tory newspapers.

"All right," he said. "I do believe them. And I believe that when Bonaparte gets back from Egypt——"

"If ever he does!"

"He will try to invade England."

She regarded him curiously. From his expression she judged that he had still an ace to play.

"Well?" she said.

"Well, I'm arranging with Ministers to raise a battalion of volunteers," he replied, with a little air of triumph.

She let this sink in. "Not," she faltered, "not for foreign service?"

He nodded. "For foreign service," he said, quietly.

§ III

That battalion, however, was never raised. Ministers, it is true, accepted Norton's offer. But Ministers did so hurriedly, without reflection, without even consulting the King. The Duke of York's unhappy attempt to kick the French out of Holland was hanging round their necks, and they were disposed to regard bigger armies as the key to military success, whereas all they really wanted was better officers. Then, the offer having been duly accepted, the trouble began.

It was Trevivian who had the first news of the hitch in the negotiations. Norton listened in silence, his private dream of riding into battle at the head of his own Trentshire regiment fading perceptibly.

"But they told me it was all right," he protested. "I settled all the details."

"It was the King," Trevivian said.

"But why?"

"His dignity was affronted."

Norton paced the length of Trevivian's room gloomily. Finally——

"What was the *real* reason, Carlos?"

"The Army people want to keep the war to themselves," said Trevivian, imperturbably.

"You mean—they got at the King?"

"That is so."

"And—we can't do anything?"

"Nothing at all, at present. The War is unpopular in the country. The plain, fat-headed public are afraid that new battalions mean new taxes. . . . Not unjustifiably," he added, with fairness.

Norton sighed. "It was my father's idea in the first place," he said reflectively. "He'll be upset. And my mother will be frightened that I may have done myself harm with the King."

Trevivian glanced at him. There were times when Fitzwarren was childishly naïve.

"I owe your mother a letter," he suggested. "I'll put the facts before her."

So, when Norton had gone, he wrote to Lady Stone, making great play with talk about "military prejudices entertained in high quarters," and rendering it quite clear that Norton had not been to blame for the failure of the plan and could not possibly suffer on account of it.

It was a friendly act, the immediate motive of which was a genuine desire to relieve the mind of an elderly lady he liked a good deal. But Carlos Trevivian was complex. During the previous season he had met a distant relation of the Marchioness—a young woman with ancestors and money, a positive heiress, if the truth were known. This young woman, he

had reason to believe, was even now at Stone. . . . And Trevivian, in a drawer of the table at which he was writing, was aware of a neat pile of unpaid tradesmen's bills.

§ IV

Lady Sheen, reading in bed at Mortlake, heard of the failure of the proposed Trentshire Volunteer Battalion with mixed feelings. It was, of course, something to thank God for, so far as the present was concerned, and so long as you did not look at the affair too closely. Foreign service meant, sooner or later, wounds and death, unless you were one of the lucky ones. And that Norton had escaped wounds and death filled her with warm, ambiguous gratitude.

But underlying this feeling she was conscious of another—nagging, uncomfortable, not to be dismissed.

The Trentshire Volunteers would never be led on foreign service by Lord Norton Fitzwarren. But there was no reason on earth why Lord Norton Fitzwarren should not go on foreign service by himself, if he had really meant those lurid remarks of his about Bonaparte invading England and English women suffering the fate of the Italian nuns.

And, quite obviously, Norton was taking no steps to go on foreign service by himself.

Her awareness that, loving him as she did, she could afford to criticize him, permitted her mind to range over the extent of his achievement with dispassionate sincerity. . . . That battalion, then, had been just a novelty, a passing interest. And, of course, a tribute to his position. The idea had flattered his self-importance. That was all.

But wasn't it, perhaps, symptomatic? Would he

ever be the leading figure she had hoped he would become when they had talked together at Naples? Now that Naples was far back in the past, and the years were flying by, she grew less and less certain of him, every day more disposed to think of him as merely an amiable member of his class, just Norton Fitzwarren, son of a Marquis, a good sort of young man, but a young man without much in him. . . .

Her reflections led her up an *impasse*. On the one hand, she still wanted Norton to be *somebody*, a big man doing real things, leaving his mark on the history of his own time. On the other hand she knew that the greater his success, the more surely he would grow away from her. And at the end of the *impasse* was the high, unscalable wall of her love for him.

She went back. It was clearly necessary to consider him from the outside world's view-point. The angle of Mortlake had to be abandoned.

How, then, did he stand in the estimation of the world?

She frowned, puzzled at the discrepancies in the sum of her knowledge on this score. Here, again, there was the recurring distinction between the surface and the reality—unless, indeed, the surface *were* the reality. It was all very disturbing and confused.

Still, one or two considerations emerged. . . . Those diplomatic excursions of his a year or two ago, for example, when Lord Calne had taken him to Paris and Lille to negotiate something or other with the French Republic. She had chaffed him at the time, she remembered—mere loving persiflage, for her heart rejoiced at the progress his having been chosen seemed to imply.

"What will you have to do?" she had enquired.

"I'm going as Lord Calne's assistant," with a touch of pride.

"And adviser?"

"Well——"

"But, my dear—the French will have no chance!"

He had been cross with her for making fun of him. And, of course, when it came to a point, Lord Calne did all the negotiating there was to be done. Norton read despatches and made notes and "talked things over", but the success or failure of the mission could never be laid at his door.

Nevertheless, when one day she received a hurried line—"We leave Paris to-night. The negotiations have broken down," Lady Sheen could not repress a pang of regret. The failure was not Norton's, could not possibly be his. Yet he had been associated with the failure. The omen was bad.

And when, some time afterwards, the Lille mission also came to nothing, her impression hardened.

Still, people generally seemed to look on him as one of the coming young men. There had been, it was true, an occasion when he had gone on a mission of his own to Berlin and that mission had succeeded. But as his duty consisted only of presenting a congratulatory address to the new King of Prussia, felicitating him upon his accession, failure was hardly to be expected. Even here, though, a contretemps had appeared. The new King caught the measles some days before Norton's arrival, and the address had to be postponed until the royal rash had subsided. Meanwhile, gossip said, Norton had got on remarkably well with the young Queen. . . .

The thoughts of Lady Sheen swerved sideways. She had been, for a few days, quite jealous of that foreign

royalty. An absurd jealousy—but she remembered it because it was the first.

She stirred restlessly in bed. The first jealous fit had been followed by a second—then a third—then a fourth—and so on. She kept them to herself. Nobody, naturally, must ever know she had been so petty. After all, she still dominated him. She was certain of that. But was he still faithful, still physically faithful?

She wished, a little sadly, that she were certain of that too.

§ v

The Belgravia House set had no secrets from one another—not, at least, other people's secrets. They had privacies of their own, as well they might. But when some lady of the London world, not in the set, chanced to take a lover, and the Duchess happened to hear about it, the news did not take long to reach Lady Mauldeth, Lady Sheen and Lady Sophia Frome.

And it came to pass that one day about this time a lady in the London world did take a lover, and that his name was Norton Fitzwarren. Her name does not matter. She was a pretty-pretty negligible little person. The whole affair, indeed, was no more than a temporary promiscuity, a deplorable *bassesse* undeniable but utterly unimportant.

The news, however, created a flutter of excitement in Belgravia House, where on a certain afternoon three persons were taking tea.

"Who-*ever* is to tell dear Henrietta?" the Duchess moaned.

Lady Mauldeth opined that dear Henrietta probably knew. But the Duchess would not be appeased.

"To think that Smiler, of *all* people——"

She lapsed into a mute exasperation.

"It was bound to come," Lady Sophia Frome submitted. "I'm only surprised it hasn't happened before."

"But, Sophia, dearest——"

Lady Mauldeth interrupted: "I told her when I was at Mortlake last that she was making herself foolish. That silly bust in the hall. . . . But I don't see why we need say anything to her about—about *this*."

The three ladies looked at each other and into their cups of tea.

"I think Sophia ought to be the one," the Duchess said, calmly overriding Lady Mauldeth.

But Lady Sophia refused to have anything to do with it. Her cautious nature, which had brought her to her present secure and satisfactory position at Belgravia House, shied at the duty. And her common sense told her that Lady Mauldeth was right. It was not necessary to "tell" poor Henrietta anything. . . .

Actually, however, some weeks passed before Lady Sheen knew of the matter.

It was one night when she had gone to the Opera with Kathy. They were both rather silent—she in a vaguely sombre reverie, Kathy because young Richard Langley, who kept coming down to Mortlake these days was so desirable and, unfortunately, so ineligible.

They were early. The curtain had yet to rise. The boxes were mostly empty. . . . Lady Sheen glanced across at Kathy, fiddling with her fan in the other corner. What was wrong with the girl? But of course, she knew what was wrong. Only so short a time ago Kathy had been a little girl who could be physicked if she seemed upset. But there was no

physic for her trouble now. . . . Men; love; trouble: so it went on. Involuntarily she sighed.

Kathy looked up gravely. "What's the matter, Mother?"

"I wish we hadn't come so early."

Her daughter made no comment, returning abruptly to her thoughts. What a pity, Lady Sheen reflected, Kathy was so moody and inexplicable! What a business life would be for her!

And then, cutting across her reverie she heard Norton's name pronounced. Sounds were coming from the next box, immediately on her right. Some people had entered. There was a woman's voice, sibilant, quick, and then the slower, deeper tones of a man. She tried to shut the voices out, to talk to Kathy, to look for acquaintances in the opposite boxes. But she could see no acquaintances, and Kathy would not talk, and the voices in the next box refused to be ignored. The more she tried to forget them, the more like trumpets they sounded. They must, she imagined, surely be heard all over the house. . . .

"She only did it for vanity," the woman's voice was saying. "Every woman in London has set traps for him. For years and years."

The man grunted. "I never could see anything in him."

There was a hiatus, as somebody apparently dropped in for a moment to chat. Then, the visit and its courteous banalities over:

"Lady Sheen's nose will be put out," the woman said.

"I suppose he'll go back to her."

"It won't be the same . . . now that he's tasted blood."

The talk seemed to go on and on for ever. Lady Sheen sat still, mentally writhing, hoping against hope that Kathy might not hear. If Kathy did hear, she gave no sign. Only, with Kathy, you could never be sure. . . .

There was a final interchange beyond the thin partition before the orchestra began the overture. The man was speaking of the girl—a young married woman—who was supposed to have captured Norton. Lady Sheen heard his growling voice:

“I should say she’s sorry she ever saw him.”

“Why?”

“They say he doesn’t call now. Got tired of it already, I suppose. . . . Pretty callous, don’t you think?”

“She asked for it.” Lady Sheen felt the invisible shrug. “Anyhow, she won’t be the last——”

The conductor’s baton fell. The orchestra was off. Blessedly, as an ocean of manna, the flooding overture filled the house.

When the voices became audible again, they were discussing the tenor.

§ VI

Surprise, anger, sadness: they took possession of her heart by turns. There was a day when Norton called at Mortlake and the servant was told to deny him. Lady Sheen was out.

She watched him riding back down the drive. Did he believe she was out? . . . Well, after all, she was. Out of luck, out of sorts, driven from her kingdom. That was the way of it.

It had had to happen, all this. But now that the moment had come it was no easier for having been

anticipated. . . . Would he, she wondered anxiously, have sought to take her in his arms, have wanted to kiss her? With that wanton girl's kisses hot on his lips?

She loitered about the garden, over the field-paths, down to the river. Then, restlessly, she descended upon her school, catechised her gardener, reprimanded several housemaids. It was all useless—useless and inevitable. The poison had to work out.

Kathy watched her quietly. Impossible to tell what was in Kathy's mind. Once the girl said:

"Never mind, Mother."

Lady Sheen looked at her, uncertain whether to cry or to be cross. Kathy added:

"I get restless too, Mother—for no reason. It passes. I suppose I get it from you."

Impossible, always, to tell what Kathy was thinking. . . . Her mother turned away and went hurriedly out of the room, to avoid the necessity of comment.

Surprise, anger, sadness: they took possession of the heart by turns. But it could not go on for ever. At the last, only the sadness remained.

Norton called again and was not denied admittance this time. In the little drawing-room, he stood by the window that gave on to the lawn and, without looking at her, said:

"You've been hearing—tales about me, I suppose?"

She nodded. "Yes."

"I'm afraid they're true."

Two bickering sparrows quarrelled across the grass in front of the window. His gaze followed them moodily, in the long pause that followed his admission. Finally——

"I'm sorry, Norton," she said.

"I'm sorry too."

"You may be now."

"I was before—directly I had begun to play the fool."

An exclamation of anguish was wrung from her, involuntary, an incoherent sound half-regretful, half-exasperated. "Why did you need to spoil everything?" she demanded, as her feeling at length took words.

He turned round, perceptibly surprised at the passion in her voice.

"Does it mean—that?" There was a little puzzled line between his brows.

"Of course it does."

He considered this in silence.

"Did you suppose I could be one of a crowd?" she said. Her tones gained an added bitterness. "A man can do that sort of thing with a wife—sometimes. But I'm not your wife."

The sparrows on the lawn were still quarrelling before the window. Their shrill denunciations came faintly through the glass.

"I didn't realise," he said lamely. "It was just—folly. I didn't think it would mean so much to you."

He looked very big and helpless there by the window. Her heart began to soften towards him. The wave of anger fell back.

"Norton." She came over and touched his arm. "Don't let's squabble any more."

"Then it's all right?" His voice was pathetically eager.

"No, it's not all right. It couldn't ever be that again."

"But——" He was crestfallen again. "I thought

"I've had one faithless lover, Norton. I couldn't stand two."

The line between his brows deepened. Reading his slow thoughts, she knew that he was digesting her words. She had put him in the same class as Sheen, and he didn't like the feel of it.

Somebody opened the door—Kathy, on her restless wanderings about the house.

"Hello, Lord Norton," she greeted him. There was a faint hostility in her manner.

He replied: "Hello, Kathy," abstractedly, hardly observing her.

"I came for a book," she announced. "That *Monk* thing. I thought it might be in here."

"On the table in my bedroom, Kathy," Lady Sheen said.

"Thanks." She drifted out again.

The interruption restored their balance. Without diffidence, as though the passages of the afternoon had never been, he said:

"You ought not to let her read that book."

"Why not?"

"It's notorious."

Lady Sheen shrugged. "She's growing up. Besides, it's a silly book. Too silly to be harmful."

"I wouldn't let a daughter of mine read it."

His face had assumed that solid, county-family Fitzwarren expression that always amused her in him—as though Antinous had turned baronet and acquired a landed estate. . . . A daughter of his, indeed. Still, some day, he would have daughters, presumably. Not hers, however. Some other woman's. Perhaps some pretty-pretty doll without an idea in her head. . . . She glanced at him wistfully. They had unconsciously

recovered their ancient habit of discussion, he, as usual, inclined to be censorious, she liberal and defensive. What a pity it couldn't always go on so!

She suddenly heard her own voice, like a traitor next the throne, saying:

"We needn't give up our talks, of course."

He turned, half doubting.

"I may still come and see you then?"

"I suppose you may."

She watched the old smile come into his eyes.

"That's wonderfully—forgiving—of you," he said deliberately.

She shook her head. "No. . . . I haven't forgiven."

"But you will?"

"Never—quite."

"I shan't play the fool any more."

Her mind raced back. Sheen had said that first time.

"It couldn't be the same," she said.

"Not if I promised?"

"No."

Norton had made her promises about gambling, over and over again. But he still won and lost heavily, she knew.

She felt the need for definition, for outlining what was to be their new relationship.

"We shall be friends, as before," she explained. "We shall still be interested in the same things. . . . And—I shall always be glad to see you. . . ."

§ VII

That last admission, before long, blew the seemingly edifice of their new relationship sky-high. She was

always glad to see him . . . always too glad, indeed. It wasn't easy to treat him as, for instance, she treated Trevivian or Lady Mauldeth's boy, young Richard Langley. And sometimes her gladness that he had come almost made her break down. One afternoon he came to Cavendish Square, and, as in the old days, went to the music-room. Outside the sad-coloured January dusk was falling over the grey roofs. It was very still. Presently, like tiny ghosts, she heard the notes of *Addio, Napoli* played with one finger on the pianoforte.

She resisted. It wasn't fair. She would be his friend, his old friend. She would *not* be one of a crowd of women.

The playing stopped. When, at length, she went down to him, he was sitting in a straight-backed, uncomfortable chair, childishly downcast. They talked politics, calmly, like the oldest friends.

And then, a few days after, he came again, about the same hour. It had been a bad day. She had had to go to the Police Office and sit in the cold Court from twelve till three because the butler had forgotten to pay the Powder Tax. She was irritated. And they had fined her sixty pounds, which was no laughing matter, in War-time. People, the world, the debasing quotidian demands upon her of this one and that one—they were too much. . . . And then, in this mood of self-pity, the sad little Neapolitan song had reached her again, from down in the music-room. . . . A tall figure looked round from the stool by the piano, then abruptly rose and strode towards her. . . .

Treachery again, always treachery!

In his arms, what matter?

§ VIII

He was hers again. That was what counted. But he was hers at a sacrifice. She had surrendered her pride, had given up that fair clear breaking off, the attainment and acceptance of which had cost her so much. For the sake of his love she had given these things up. For his soiled, second-hand love.

She closed her mind to the facts. She shut her ears to gossip and "news". In her need of him, even such as he now was, she learned a deep humility, and at the same time she was conscious of an inward calm, where he was concerned, that she had not known before.

Naturally that first promiscuity of his had its successors. He had tasted blood. He was a prey to all the evils that breed in the amiable idleness of the London world. And he was run after. . . . The forbidden fruit was so easy to steal. It was necessary to shake the bough so very, very lightly.

Always, though, he came back to the music-room at Cavendish Square, to the little drawing-room giving on to the lawn at Mortlake. And always, without question, he was taken back into the fold.

His reputation grew. Young Richard Langley, in that anonymous but comprehensive satire on the Tory Party he wrote for the *Morning Chronicle*, thought him worth mentioning, along with Trevivian and the rest of Pitt's Young Men. Lady Sheen read it sadly:

*Fitzwarren whispers in each shell-like ear
The words it shrinks to know but longs to hear.*

Two lines. . . . They cut her deeply. She liked young Langley a good deal. He was clever but, of

course, young. He might, she thought, have left Norton out of his satire.

Still, there it was. That was the niche he filled, the label he had earned, the picture of Norton Fitzwarren. There were no excuses, no extenuations. Her lover was a recognized philanderer, one who was understood to have "a way with women". For the second time in her life, a man had galloped off, serenely selfish, dragging her love—all she had to give—in the mire behind him. . . .

One day in winter, she rode over to Petersham to see a girl who had had a baby. The girl had been a housemaid at Mortlake—a quiet, competent worker, not much given to chatter with the other servants. Afterwards, she had left to work at Richmond and Lady Sheen had lost touch with her. Then, yesterday, the housekeeper had told her about this baby. Lady Sheen decided to ride over. The exercise, the astringent morning air, would do her good.

The girl was still in bed, with the baby lying asleep on her arm. Lady Sheen produced the little garments she had brought.

"You will soon be about again," she said cheerfully.

The girl looked away, towards the small square of light at the cottage window.

"I don't suppose anybody will want to have me in their house now."

"Nonsense, Mary!"

"No, it's not nonsense either, my lady."

The baby began to wail.

"There, there!" The mother snuggled the tiny body closer to her. "Little treasure. . . . Little man!"

Lady Sheen felt that her eyes were moist. The woman, too, had suffered, had been betrayed. She had been through the agony, the bewildered tumult of it all. Yet how quiet she was, how gentle!

The child's wailing ceased. The girl looked up.

"I shall find something to do all right, my lady," she said. "I can work."

"Would you like to come back to Mortlake?"

Mary's face suddenly shone. She surveyed her visitor in speechless adoration.

"Oh! My—lady!"

"I'll see that everyone is kind to you," Lady Sheen said. "No—Don't cry—there's a good girl. . . ."

Riding home she thought it all over. These unmarried mothers—they were sometimes the best of girls. Some of them were bad, of course. But, bad and good, they all had to pay. Their road led so near the great Highway of Prostitution. They had to take so few steps. . . . And the man in the case got off scot free. The law left him alone in splendid privilege.

She had discussed the question with Norton from time to time. But he had received her views coolly, with a little deprecating smile. She knew what was in his mind, what presently he would say: If housemaids had babies born out of wedlock, they had to pay the penalty. Besides, girls who did so were wantons, by that token alone, only fit for the street.

It sounded logical, sensible. Only it didn't fit all cases. And it wasn't fair. Mary over there at Peter-sham had loved some man madly, without a thought of the future. He had taken her love lightly, carelessly, perhaps hardly knowing what it was that he was taking. Now he had finished with Mary. There could

be many more Marys in his life. So long as the Parish hadn't to support his progeny, nobody bothered!

She rode quietly on, along the hard country road, in the winter weather. Once or twice the horse slipped, going downhill. The sky was sombre and cold; the old houses about Richmond stood squarely aloof behind their garden walls, among the dark tracery of leafless trees; the air bit keenly.

Her thoughts meandered. . . . Mary; Mary's unknown betrayer; Norton; herself. . . . Men and women in their loves, hurting one another, sometimes bickering like the sparrows, sometimes noble, sometimes unutterably base . . . and always, always the woman paying for the whole business, the good and the evil of it alike.

She turned the horse in at the gate. Passing the drawing-room window, on her way round to the stables, she saw a tall figure standing just inside. The smiling eyes saluted her and her heart leapt—the traitor next the throne. . . .

She smiled gaily back.

§ IX

It is impossible at this date to say precisely when the reign of Lady Sheen came to an end. It must have been a difficult problem even for a contemporary, and a fairly intimate one. Perhaps, like most other sovereigns, she reigned, more or less, until her death. This event—so much at least is clear—took place in 1821, on the confines of Italy, whither she was taking an ailing grandchild towards the elixir of the Mediterranean sunshine.

And until she died, Norton visited her, wrote to her—first from the exciting scenes of his early

embassies, then in the long years of conjugal retirement among children and cattle and shooting parties. She did not live to see his last ambassadorial blooming, long afterwards, in the Paris of Louis Philippe.

It was inevitable that, at this latter end, they were merely friends. She had to come to terms with decline and fall; to witness the failing of her vitality, the insidious advance of wrinkles, the first grey hairs; to realise, one day, that a man, looking at her, could not possibly desire to possess her: she had to cross the woman's Rubicon, that every woman denies.

The days, the months passed by. The odd connection she maintained with Norton, which seemed sometimes to be almost the plinth of his life and sometimes only an irrelevant relic of his youth, went on and on. She heard about his other women, mostly from friends; once or twice, rather shamefacedly, from himself. The bust of Antinous still stood upon its pedestal in the hall at Mortlake. And for the Antinous who continued, less and less frequently perhaps, to dismount before the portico, she was always whatever he desired her to be. . . .

The days, the months passed by. There was a day in early October when she had been to call at Mauldeth House, driving over from Mortlake in the glory of the autumn morning. Mauldeth House entered into her calculations a good deal, ever since Kathy and Lady Mauldeth's son, Richard, had fallen so desperately in love. It was necessary to be more friendly there than she really cared to be. She felt she was no match, in an affair of this kind, for the worldly, manœuvring mind of Lady Mauldeth.

Then, driving back, she had noticed, in the busiest part of Piccadilly, an open carriage drawn up by the

pavement. A young lady was seated in one corner, apparently listening to the remarks of a tall young man who lounged with one arm on the carriage's crested, upholstered side. As Lady Sheen drove past, the young man seemed just to have said something more daring than small-talk. They were looking at each other, those two, with tentative, half-smiling speculation. A move in the game had clearly been made. One day, next week, next month, even perhaps next summer, the knight would take the queen. . . .

Lady Sheen drove on. They had not seen her, Norton and that girl. They had been engrossed in themselves, in the game they were playing. And, after all, it did not matter. She knew he did these things. Seeing them with her own eyes hurt a little, no doubt. But it was no use caring. She would go mad very soon if she let herself care. . . . She loved him. That was the ambit of everything. Nothing he did could make any difference to that.

Besides, there were new anxieties in her life now—Kathy and Richard Langley for instance. New people were taking the stage, the generation she had always looked upon as children. They too, it seemed, had their loves, their divine necessities that sanctified and destroyed. The recognition was surprising, not at all agreeable. One belonged then, already, to the past. . . . Yet perhaps there was compensation even in that, a still content, monastic, beautiful, a putting away of the world.

She sighed. The carriage drove on through the blue and gold world, along roads brown with fallen horse-chestnut leaves, the first to burgeon, the earliest to fade. People glanced at her as she passed, and several men touched their hats, for along the semi-suburban

country of the river valley she was well known and well loved. A farmer from whom she had often bought manure; the teacher at her village school; a bankrupt's daughter whom she had placed comfortably as a governess; little furtive children, shy, awe-struck, dirty-nosed: they saw her pass, received her sad, gracious little nod and smile, went their several ways.

We, too, see her pass. The carriage turns in at the gates. Standing there, we watch it bowl up the drive, coming to a halt at length in front of the house. The man jumps down, opens the carriage door, and she descends.

A little faded, but still elegant, still desirable, she pauses for a moment before the portico, to give some instructions about the horses. The gold sunshine mellows the weathered brick of the walls; pigeons strut across the gravel; the carriage moves away, round the corner to the vaned and lichened stables.

She turns and goes in under the portico, through the dark hall, past the bust of Antinous on its pedestal. . . . Time closes his shadows over her.

BOOK III

THE LOVES OF MEN AND WOMEN

CHAPTER I

JOAN STATHERN

§ I

TO Stone, and to the Marchioness of Stone, that same Autumn of 1803, came calamity. The Marquis died. He had caught a chill while attending some function as Lord-Lieutenant and Custos Rotulorum of Trentshire. The chill engendered a fever. Now the Marquis lay in his room at Stone, all that remained of him.

The great white house took the sunshine as on all other sunny autumn days of the past; the gardeners busied themselves among the flowers; the air of routine was intact: only, every now and then, a carriage would drive up to the front door and some vaguely melancholy figure would hurry into the house.

Goward had come, Goward who was Marquis now and who, in the library, was already sorting out papers; his sister Louisa, who hardly ever visited Stone, had come; Susan and Charlotte had brought their husbands; Norton's carriage was even now on its way from Stonham.

Countess (Marchioness now) would be present for the funeral: only Augusta, poor plain Augusta, who had escaped from Stone less than a year before, would not be present. Augusta had achieved matrimony at last—matrimony with an impecunious Irish squireen, but still matrimony. Now she was expecting her first child at any hour. To travel was quite out of the question. The clan was gathered and Augusta, who

had always seemed to the clan to be something recognizably permanent at Stone, was not there. It may be that she was not disappointed. She had received much kindly condescension, much thoughtless patronage from her brothers and sisters, in the course of the long years at Stone. And she was inclined to love her barren place in the sun of the County Galway better than her back seat among the splendours of Stone. But, like most people with a strong vein of simplicity in them, Augusta was secretive of her private thoughts. Her letter to Stone explaining her inability to be present was a model of what such a letter should be. Goward, moved to exaggeration by the emotional moment, spoke quite highly of it. "She was always the best of us," he went so far as to say.

"*One* of the best," he corrected himself, a little later.

Susan told him he had taken a long time to discover this. And also that, anyhow, she didn't believe in old Gussy's pious grief. She knew Gussy better than he did, and Gussy was sly.

Goward said, "Really", with marked coldness, and retired to the library.

They were sitting in the drawing-room, after dinner. Charlotte did needle-work and maintained a suitably sorrowful demeanour; her long-nosed husband (now, since his father's death, a Duke) yawned and coughed and wished that one's father-in-law's decease need not interfere with one's hunting; Susan's Hemingby was apparently deep in a book; Susan herself, ostensibly occupied with a piece of embroidery, allowed her attention to wander sardonically over the others, storing up observations for future use. Louisa, the half-sister, sat writing a letter to her husband, who was abroad.

That was how Norton found them, the evening he reached Stone. There was an odd irrelevance about their bearing, an unreality that disturbed him. The news of his father's death had been unexpected and—for him at least—a blow. All the way from London his mind had been ranging affectionately across the years since his memories of his father began. And now, at the door of the drawing-room, those memories seemed to be rebuffed. All these people—his sisters and their husbands—they were really trying to ignore the reason of their presence there together; each one had private preoccupations that the dead man must not be permitted to upset; each one, for a different reason, conveyed the impression that, after all, it was a great bore to have had to come to Stone.

A worldly set of people. . . . More worldly than himself, for all his mundane mode of life. Why weren't they touched, as he had been touched?

They greeted him:

"Hello, Norton. . . . You're looking well. . . . Which way did you come?" And Susan's sceptical: "Hello, old Norton. Managed to tear yourself away then."

"Where's mother?" he said.

Nobody seemed to be very clear. Charlotte, with a hint of past tears in her voice, thought mother was certain to be in her own room.

"Is she—seeing people?"

"She'll see you, of course."

"Tell her I've come, will you, Charlotte?"—he glanced round—"while I'm having a wash," he added.

He held the door open for Charlotte and followed her out. When their steps had died away:

"I really think Norton is getting a good deal like Goward," Louisa remarked.

Susan made a wry face. "How dreadful!"

Her half-sister smiled weakly and returned to her letter. She wrote: "Susan is here. You will remember her, I expect. She was the one who told Robert to his face that he was a bore, you know. She still comes out with the most awful things."

From over his weighty book, Hemingby looked across at his wife.

"I'm not sure that Louisa's wrong," he said quietly.

Susan looked back at him. She valued Hemingby's opinions in secret, but on principle disparaged them in public.

"What do you mean?" she enquired, with a show of truculence.

Charlotte's Duke had a flash of insight. "I notice Susan always says 'What do you mean?' when she's in a corner and wants to gain time," he remarked peeping diffidently at Hemingby round his nose.

No one took any notice so he subsided again.

"Norton's getting on in years," Hemingby proceeded, pursuing the even tenor of his thought. "He must be thirty, I suppose. And he certainly has an air of wisdom and responsibility sometimes that definitely recalls Goward's." To Susan alone, he might have said "pomposity" instead of "responsibility." But Hemingby was constitutionally discreet. Hence, possibly, his mating with Susan.

Charlotte came in again and resumed her needle-work.

"What do *you* think about Norton, Charlotte?" Susan asked her, with veiled derision.

"Me? About Norton——?" She was put into

confusion. Nobody, in general, demanded judgments of Charlotte. "I think—I think that if he lived a better life——"

Susan cut her short. "Charlotte's right," she said. "If Norton lived what she calls a better life, he might, I agree, get something like Goward. But you all know perfectly well that he isn't living a better life——"

She paused. Charlotte put in hastily: "There's no need to stress that, Susan."

Susan shrugged. "Personally, I prefer Norton as he is. I don't mind his women. And anyhow, he isn't sillier over women than most men."

Charlotte looked pained, and Charlotte's Duke smiled with a not very successful attempt at composure. Surely this damned sister of Charlotte's hadn't heard about him and that land agent's wife.

"I'm sure *you* have nothing to grumble about," the mature Louisa suggested archly, glancing from Susan to Hemingby and then back to her letter.

Susan agreed. "Hemingby's different. He's only silly about me."

The door opened. Norton came in.

"Is mother ready?" he asked Charlotte.

She nodded uncertainly. "Yes—quite ready," she said.

§ II

But the Marchioness, unhappily, was anything but ready.

For years she had schooled herself to meet the hour when her husband should die. In the normal course of things, such an hour was bound to come. She was very unlikely to predecease him. And the menace of that moment had stood beside her chair, at the foot

of her bed, in the broad sunshine and in the night, for thirty years. Now the moment had arrived: and she, who should have borne it like a woman of courage and breeding, was taking it like a kitchenmaid.

So, bitterly, she told herself. She knew that she ought to hold her head high, to go about the house ordering affairs as she had always been used to do. But the fear of breaking down, the beloved associations of each corner, each piece of furniture almost, kept her to her room. The consolations of religion, she found, were negligible: they might come later, in tranquillity—they had no place as yet. And the assuagements of poetry and philosophy were outside her scope. Now she had to steel herself to meet Norton. That was his step, firm, rather heavy, on the stairs. She waited for his knock. . . .

"Come in," she said. The calmness of her own voice surprised and strengthened her.

The door opened. . . . How beautiful and sorrowful his face was! How much he was still her own son, her little Norton, in spite of dissipation, in spite of all the tales that came to her ears, all that had hurt and puzzled her so!

"Come in, Norton," she repeated.

He closed the door carefully behind him and, coming forward, bent down to kiss her brow, taking her thin hands in his own.

"Mother," he said, simply.

That was enough. He had said all that was necessary, had given her more than all the wordy sympathy in the world could have given. They sat together, she in her chair by the window, he on a low stool at her feet, very quiet, very intimate.

By degrees, she began to talk, in detached phrases,

as if her frozen mind were slowly thawing. . . .
"Thirty-five years . . . thirty-five years and five months, Norton. . . .

"The happiest of wives," she added. "No woman could ever have been happier. . . . The dear house—and him—and you children. . . ."

Her mind slid back among its memories. Outside, the gorgeous blue curtains of the dusk were hung about the park. A maid brought lamps, that gilt the little homely boudoir garishly, blotting out the night.

The Marchioness watched the girl go, a trifle wistfully.

"I brought that girl here," she said. "I know her father and her mother. Her brother is in the stables. All the servants here—they are my family, my children. And I have to leave them. They are Goward's now, and Goward's wife's."

"Countess is an easy mistress," he comforted her.

"Ah, yes, easy. But I loved them all. Countess won't do that."

He was silent, musing upon the fate of dowagers under the English land system. They had no redress, these well-born mothers, once their husbands were gone. In an instant they were whisked from the pinnacle of possession and authority to a limbo in which they had neither rights nor privileges. The country seat, the park, the lands, the town house, the suburban villa—they went to the new lord and the new lady. You had your hour, and then you cleared out. Seaside towns, spas, remote villages received your old body, during those lengthy periods when none of your children happened to be willing to entertain you.

A cruel system, to widows. . . . Involuntarily, he pressed the thin hand lying in his own.

"We can live together," he said. "I'll take a house in town somewhere."

He felt a tear fall upon his wrist and looked up.

"Really, Norton?" His mother was smiling through wet eyelids.

"Of course, mother."

"But—the money. What are you going to do now that your father is dead? I had hoped you would be independent by this time. You see—Goward——"

"I'll manage," he assured her.

"Not by gambling though."

He shrugged. "It seems to be all I can do."

"No. You must go to Mr. Pitt."

"Pitt can't help much, I'm afraid."

This, she knew, was true, for, incredible as it always seemed to her, Mr. Pitt was out of office at the moment. And statesmen out of office have no salaried places to give away to younger sons.

The problem braced her. Because, after all, what mattered was that Norton was here, Norton hadn't deserted her. In the hour of common deprivation, they stood together. The vague, problematical house in town became more solid, a house built on rock, a house of many mansions. She imagined the entertaining they would do there, the influential people she would invite, the difference it would make to Norton's career.

Rashly, without thought of detail: "You're right," she said. "We'll find the money somehow."

The little room was filled with the promise of adventure.

§ III

Very absurd and very dear it often seemed to him afterwards, looking back on that little scene in his mother's boudoir. Like two waifs, two unfortunates

whom sudden bankruptcy has overwhelmed, they had sat on and on there that evening, just as though they were not the widow and the son of the most powerful landowner in the shire. The emotion of the hour dramatised and falsified their sense of values. In a calmer moment it would have been clear to them both that nobody belonging to the Fitzwarrens was ever entirely, or even uncomfortably, without money.

And, in fact, when the will was read, it turned out that Norton and his mother were provided for more than adequately. The old Marquis had governed well. To the darkened room where he spent his last years, stewards and factors and managers had come each quarter with reports about timber and growing crops and tillages, with statements of mining dues and news of sound investments in land. The tenant farmers, sure of fair dealing (no oppressive agent ever used the authority of Stone for his oppressions more than once), paid their way. Much money came quietly in, very much more than went out, for the darkened room offered few possibilities of extravagance.

So that, whilst the hereditary Fitzwarren lands, and much besides, went with the marquise to Goward, there remained outside the entail, the fruit of a simple and virtuous life, a coal and iron estate, unencumbered and as yet hardly touched—a potential source of considerable mineral rights for ever.

This estate was bequeathed to Norton, subject only to a life annuity for his mother.

Charlotte's Duke commented on it, several days after the thing was known. The date of his comment is significant, for the mental processes of Charlotte's Duke went on at a leisurely pace. He was walking on the terrace with Hemingby and they were talking

politics. With abrupt irrelevance, Charlotte's Duke said:

"I thought that bequest of Norton's oddish."

Hemingby had to divert the stream of his thought and was displeased.

"Very oddish," he replied unhelpfully.

"Breaking up the estate like that. I was always taught that a younger son could do what he damned well liked, so long as he didn't expect a cut off the joint."

"It's a bad system," Hemingby said.

"What! Primogeniture bad?"

"Bad as can be."

The ducal mind was thrown momentarily into confusion by the glaring heresy. Eldest sons, it seemed to expostulate, ought to stick together. That was the plain sense of things. And here was Hemingby, an eldest son himself, advocating the carving up of estates like any damned foreigner. The face of Charlotte's Duke began to wear a worried look and he ventured one or two furtive glances at Hemingby round his nose.

Hemingby took compassion on him. "Of course," he said, "I don't say that a younger son *oughtn't* to provide for himself. He certainly ought. That's what we keep up the law and the churches for. But when you have a case of a son who isn't likely to get on in the world particularly well——"

The ducal mind grasped the point tenaciously. "Yes, yes, yes—our friend Norton—not perhaps—well, perhaps not quite——"

Hemingby said, "Exactly," which seemed to satisfy Charlotte's Duke. They walked on together along the Terrace in an aura of primogenitive amity. . . .

The storm passed over Stone at last: the Marquis was laid to rest among the old Fitzwarrens in the Family Vault; the daughters and their husbands drove away; the Dowager Marchioness, her eyes a little watery, for the autumn air was inclined to be sharp, went with Susan; Norton left for London. Goward and Countess, rather lonely, rather strange and unhappy, remained in the great white house.

They dined almost in silence. When dinner was over:

"I'm glad your father thought of Norton," Countess said.

Goward said he was glad too.

"A pity he doesn't marry."

"Yes."

"I suppose he'll settle down one day."

"I suppose so."

"I wonder who it will be."

Goward vouchsafed no reply to this. He considered wondering to be an unprofitable occupation and never indulged in it.

"I think I'll go to the library for an hour," he said, after a seemly interval. "All this legal business——"

His wife, with apparent irrelevance, laughed. He looked injured. Women could never understand all the things men had to do in libraries.

"I was thinking," Countess said, with pensive deliberation, "of that time Norton forged your signature."

Goward shook his head. "A bad business, that. Lucky I discovered it in time."

"I met the girl again the other day," Countess added. "You remember—I told you——"

(In a weak moment she had confided to Goward, some time ago, the secret history of Norton's ancient backsliding.)

"What, the Stathern girl? Jane, Jean, or whatever her name was?"

"Joan," said Countess. "Joan Stathern."

"That's right. . . . Married, I suppose?"

"No."

"H'm. Rather surprising." He considered privately the surprisingness of Joan's continued virginity. "I thought she was looking after her father abroad somewhere," he said.

"She was. He died."

"Died, did he? Poor old Stathern. . . . So she's come back?"

"Yes." Countess nodded slowly. Her thoughts were clearly intriguing to her. "She's—come back. . . ."

§ IV

The house in town, where Norton and his mother were to begin the new life together, did in fact emerge at last into the realm of reality, and proved to be situated in Great Stanhope Street, as conveniently near to the parks as even Lady Stone's steadfast love of trees and grass could wish for.

To Norton the change was superficial. He was not a man who collected things or took much notice of his background, and, having transferred his personal belongings from Whitehall, he settled down to his old routine. But the house was Lady Stone's endless pre-occupation. The furnishing and decoration, the selection of servants and the building-up of a domestic environment which satisfied her rather exacting ideas, provided her at once with a reason for existence and a

source of forgetfulness. She was sixty and she had left the dearest things far behind. Even Norton, a mere unobservant son, was amazed at the energy and interest she displayed.

People came often to dine at Great Stanhope Street—relatives and friends at first, joined later on by celebrities, chiefly political. Mr. Pitt came; old Lord Calne, gentle, white-haired, incredibly diplomatic; Trevivian, rather silent and obviously fretting under his leader's exclusion from office. The Pittite Tories, in the days when Pitt, for reasons of his own, was permitting a second eleven to govern, gathered more and more around the table of the Dowager Marchioness of Stone, awaiting the hour when the second eleven should flounder to its appointed end.

Sixty; without charm; without even the remains of beauty or a flair for clothes: somehow the Marchioness gained her set, and an important set at that. Perhaps it was her simplicity, the fundamental purity of all her reactions, the honest reliability of her, that pleased. But however it was, dining at home became more amusing than dining at Belgravia House, and Norton ceased almost entirely to form one of the Duchess' circle. That circle was, indeed, diminishing rapidly.

"The rats leave the sinking ship," Lady Mauldeth said to Lady Sophia Frome, one day when the Duchess was unwell.

Lady Sophia opened big, innocent eyes that had deceived the world for more years than she cared to count.

"Not *sinking*, Elizabeth dear. . . . You surely don't mean *sinking*?"

Lady Mauldeth explained that that was precisely what she did mean, and her voice was a little bitter.

"We can't even get Smiler away from that old mother of his."

"Smiler's a dutiful son," Lady Sophia murmured.

"Dutiful fiddlesticks!"

Lady Sophia simpered and merely remarked: "Oh, Elizabeth!"

"Smiler's wise, after all," her friend added wearily. "We can give him nothing but promises—perhaps not even that. . . . And if Pitt comes back, as I suppose he will, Smiler is certain to get something big. . . ."

At the moment, however, Pitt's coming back seemed anything but certain. Nobody even knew why he had fallen from power in the first place. Had he indeed really fallen at all? Had the King turned against him? Were the intrigues of the pious Addington and the slow-moving Boreland (he who years ago had "grand-toured" with Norton) dangerous enough to have dislodged the great man? Did he resign because the King refused Emancipation to the Catholics? Or because he wanted somebody else to get the odium of the inevitable French peace? Or simply because, after the long years, he felt he needed a rest?

Nobody knew. The slender figure, still hardly touched by age, moved from Bath to London, from London back to Bath. Agreeable, impenetrable, he kept the secret of his mind fast locked. Not one of those who stood behind him, not faithful Dundas, not even Trevivian—his eager, impetuous lieutenant, almost his son—knew what went on behind the mask.

It irked Trevivian, this sense of exclusion from the Master's mind. Pitt had wanted him to stay in with Boreland, as he easily could have done, but he had preferred to throw in his lot with his leader. Having

done this, however, he expected a measure of confidence, a sign of his leader's faith in him—and this was exactly what Pitt withheld. Trevivian's temper gave way. He attacked and ridiculed the Addington administration against the known wish of Pitt that the Addington administration should die of its own inanition. Pitt was displeased. He was known to have referred in company to his lieutenant's "ungovernable ambition . . . impatience of obscurity" and so on. The son, it seemed, was like to become a prodigal son if things went on in this way much longer.

What made it worse for Trevivian was that his position in the world was more prosperous than it had ever been. He had money now, and a wife with ancestors. Lady Stone's relative, the young heiress whom he had been pursuing in the days of that still-born Trentshire Battalion of Norton's, had fallen at last before Trevivian's guns. Trevivian could be very attractive to a woman when he pleased. And the young woman (she was quite a nonentity, really) looked upon him, found him fair and, hearing on all hands that he was a "coming" man, married him. She gave him her money (such of it as she could dispose of) and the association of her rank; he gave her the promise of being a Minister's wife, powerful, courted, the object of incessant attentions.

And now, when everything might have been perfect, Trevivian was out of office. He felt that he had failed to fulfil his part of the bargain with his wife. They lived on an estate near Windsor, in a good house surrounded by pleasant farm-country. The new Mrs. Trevivian would have been happy, for she found after marriage that she was very fond of her husband, Minister or no Minister. But she saw that he was

dissatisfied. Country life bored him. He joked about it, but it bored him. And yet he hated to lead a London life while feeling that he was not at the hub of things. He was "difficult". Often she sighed.

"We must have more people here," she said one day. She was sitting on his knee, honeymoon fashion, after dinner.

Trevivian replied that people were mostly fatheads.

"Carlos!" She pretended to be very cross with him. "If you knew what harm your habit of calling people fools and fatheads does you, you would keep a guard on your tongue."

"Sorry, my dear. . . . Whom shall we ask? Sir John Scumbling?"

Sir John Scumbling was the owner of the next estate. He talked much of steers and heifers and yearlings, and little of anything else.

Mrs. Trevivian slapped her husband's hand. "Sir John is a good man."

"I know. . . . Who else is coming?"

"Nobody, if you won't behave."

He ignored that. Trevivian believed in being master in his own house, irrespective of whose money had paid for it.

"We'll have a Christmas party," he said.

She waited for him.

"Norton shall come, and his mother—if we can get her. . . . And—let me see—Goward and his wife perhaps. Goward has to be cultivated now, you know. . . . And that girl Countess takes about with her, that Miss Stathern. I'll get Tiplady to come down, too. He may feel inclined to marry her, if I tell him he ought to. I'd rather like Flanders and Lady Flanders as well——"

"Oh, but Carlos!"

"They're married now, my dear."

Mrs. Trevivian looked grave. "Nobody receives her. We'll get a bad name. . . . I'm sorry, of course."

Her husband stood firm. "Lady Flanders against Sir John Scumbling," he said.

"But she was divorced."

"I know."

"She ran away with him."

"Yes."

"There was a baby—long before they were married."

"Well?"

"Well, you know what people are like."

Trevivian agreed emphatically that he did.

"Well then?"

"Flanders was my friend," said Trevivian. "And anyhow I think it was a brave thing to run away like that."

"Yes but—to ask Norton's mother to meet her —"

He pondered that, and she added:

"It might injure you with the party too. Mr. Pitt is very strict, you know."

Instantly she saw that she had blundered. Her husband's dark thin face took on a stubborn, sulky air. Then he smiled.

"I'm going to see Flanders in town to-morrow," he announced. "I'll see if they can come. . . ."

§ v

The beginning of Trevivian's Christmas gathering, that winter of 1803, was inauspicious. He persisted in his mad idea of asking Lady Flanders, and the rather solitary outcast couple were delighted. Lady Flanders

(the slightly faded development of the Lady Cheddon of Naples) hoped that it was the beginning of her rehabilitation. Mrs. Trevivian, however, who had no idea of rehabilitating Lady Flanders, quarrelled—for the first time—with her husband. There was an attack of hysterics, a cutting of stay-laces, a good cry and a reconciliation. And Trevivian gained his foolish point. The party did in fact take place, and the erstwhile Lady Cheddon was present on the occasion. . . .

Countess received her invitation with mixed feelings. She did not greatly care for Trevivian. On the other hand it would only be for a couple of days and there might be some jolly people there. The responsibilities of being not merely Goward's wife (she had got used to that) but the Marchioness of Stone weighed a little on her. It had been fun, long ago, to be queenly and dignified as Ambassadors at Paris. But nowadays, when every year, unhappily, was making you more queenly and dignified than you cared to be, it was a relief to leave the pomps of rank behind you when you could.

Goward, she knew, would not go to Trevivian's. Goward mistrusted Trevivian. He would have business at Stone. But Norton would certainly be there. . . . Yes, on the whole, she thought she would go, and take Joan Stathern.

Somehow or other, Norton and that girl hadn't met since she had returned from abroad. For a time Countess had had some idea of marrying them off. Poor Joan had wasted her youth on her old father. And Norton had spent his on—well, on Lady Sheen chiefly. Still, it wasn't too late. Countess, beneath her worldly veneer, hid an essentially sentimental and

kindly spirit, and the thought of bringing together the peccant boy and girl of Hammersmith days was very pleasing to her.

But somehow, so far, she hadn't managed it. Norton dined so much at home and Lady Stone did not encourage young women there. Then Countess herself had had to be in Trentshire for a month, and afterwards Joan had been visiting relatives in the country. So that the romantic meeting, which she had hoped she might witness, had not taken place.

This party at Trevivian's promised an opportunity. She scribbled a note to Joan and sent a footman across with it straightway. . . .

They went down to Trevivian's place near Windsor together—Countess and Joan in the first carriage, Countess' maid and Countess' luggage in the second. Joan, being poor, had only a little luggage and no maid. Countess glanced at her from time to time as they passed on their way through the river valley. She had had bad luck, Joan had. It wasn't a thing you asked questions about, but Countess understood that Joan lived entirely on and with a brother. Absolutely no means of her own. . . . A situation which, to Countess, was something outside experience. And here the girl was—no longer very young, with no special place in society, no particular friends, only the brother she kept house for and on whose charity she depended for the necessities of life. The girl came of a good family, of course. But beyond that—there was simply nothing.

Countess' mind strayed back to their first meeting after Joan's return. At Amelia Hagnaby's, it had been. Amelia had been understanding but realistic about Joan. "No father, no mother and no money, my

dear," she had confided to Countess *sotto voce*. "And I'm afraid she's let all her chances slip."

"She must have *had* chances," Countess had replied. "Any woman can marry in the colonies."

Yes, Amelia Hagnaby agreed that this was so. But she really didn't know why it hadn't operated in Joan's case. The fact remained, it hadn't, and here the girl was. . . .

The carriage rolled smoothly along the hard winter road. Countess determined to try a question.

"Joan," she said, sweetly.

The girl turned. Her eyes, still with their old hint of eager expectancy, were a shade defensive. Queerly attractive she was, Countess thought, wrapped up there in the other corner of the carriage—a very downright personality. Countess felt a little afraid of her.

"Didn't any man ever ask you to marry him?" she asked. The perfection of her manner carried off the indiscreet demand successfully.

Joan Stathern said: "Why?"

This was precisely what Countess could not explain, but she was not to be eluded.

"Well, of course, we are very interested in your future, Joan," she said. The "we", which presumably included Goward, was perhaps unwarranted by the facts.

The girl looked out of the carriage window, then back at Countess.

"Two men asked me," she said. "At least—one was only a boy. And the other was a soldier. So I suppose neither of them count very much."

Countess knew who the boy was.

"Who was the soldier?" she said.

Without hesitation, "Lord Rookwith," Joan Stathern replied.

Countess pondered. Rookwith, Rookwith—of course, the young rascal who had been at Hammer-smith with Norton. This was really turning out very oddly.

"You met him abroad?" she pursued.

Joan nodded. "He came over with the Fifty-first, you know. He helped me out of a tight place once."

Countess encouraged her. By degrees a tale emerged—a tale of the negro bandits who had infested the Indies at the beginning of the war. They had surrounded the little house in the hills where old Sir Robert Stathern and his family had been living one summer. The situation had been desperate—capture and heavy ransoms at the best, unmentionable fates at the worst. Then, Rookwith had turned up with his soldiers. . . . A romantic, adventurous little episode.

"Quite like a novel," Countess commented.

"It might have been—dreadful."

"Yes. . . . So he wanted to marry you, did he?"

Joan Stathern smiled, with a characteristic comical lift of the eyebrows.

"So he said."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, you know what the officers of the Fifty-first were."

Countess did not know, but forbore to press the point. With a sympathetic air—

"You sent him away then?"

"I had my father to look after."

"But, suppose—suppose he asked you now?"

"It would be the same, of course."

The traversing of a rough piece of road interrupted conversation for a moment.

"You see," the girl added at length, "I didn't love Rookwith—not like that."

Countess laughed a little laugh. "You are a funny girl," she exclaimed involuntarily, settling herself back among her cushions.

Joan Stathern looked serious and puzzled. For the second time that day, she said:

"Why?"

§ VI

Several miles to the east of Countess' two carriages came Norton, travelling alone.

The Dowager Marchioness had taken a chill a few days ago. Moreover, she was giving a big dinner a week hence. So that it was manifestly necessary for her to remain quietly at home conserving her strength, rather than gadding about in other people's houses. Norton left her beside a good fire, with a black kitten she had just acquired, a volume of sermons, and her memories of other Christmases.

"Look after yourself," she said, as he went out.

He promised he would, without knowing quite what she meant. Probably she meant nothing more than the expression of that ambiguous tenderness he was accustomed to receive from her. . . .

At Trevivian's, Tiplady and his host were in the library. The endless sour discussion of Pitt's motives and Pitt's intentions was going on. Trevivian was being vehement and Tiplady was agreeing with Trevivian.

Norton's entrance dammed Trevivian's complaints for a while. There was some good-humoured banter about Trevivian's farming operations, Sir John

Scumbling and the price of corn. Then, uneasily, Trevivian said:

"Is Pitt back in town?"

Norton thought not.

"I believe he's breaking up," Trevivian brooded.

This was a new idea. Supposing "anything" happened to Pitt—how would they all stand? The absence of any security, the feeling of quicksand under their feet, made them silent.

"Boreland said to me the other day," Tiplady ventured, "that Pitt wasn't the same man."

Trevivian did not even glance at his *fidus Achates*.

"Damn Boreland and damn what he said!" he remarked calmly. "Boreland is an old woman—never said a sensible thing in his life."

Tiplady smiled weakly, trying to convey by his manner that he was used to this treatment and liked it.

Norton yawned.

"Who else is here?" he demanded.

Trevivian recapitulated the tale of his guests. Norton was already aware of Lady Flanders' invitation. It was, of course, oddly inconsistent in a climber like Carlos to do such a thing. But generous, too. He honoured him for it. . . . His reflections were truncated by the sound of the last name on Trevivian's list.

"Miss who?" he demanded.

"Stathern."

Norton digested this. "Not *Joan Stathern*?" he verified at length.

Trevivian nodded. "A very pleasant young woman. Your sister-in-law is bringing her. . . . In fact," he added, "they are probably at this moment drinking tea

with my wife, the better to support the rigours of dressing for dinner."

Norton said nothing. His mind raced back—back to a time before Lady Sheen, before his promiscuities, earlier than Mrs. Courtis or that girl—what was her name?—Hannah Mumby. . . . Back to the Upper Mall at Hammersmith, the great trees, the two boys on the sloping grass, the long crocodile of Twisletons' girls passing by. . . .

Trevivian and Tiplady were starting another discussion. Norton perceived that his momentary disappearance from Trevivian's library had clearly gone unnoticed.

A footman knocked and entered.

"Mrs. Trevivian's compliments and would the gentlemen care to take tea in the drawing-room?"

Trevivian said he preferred not to take tea. Tiplady concurred. Norton accepted the invitation and followed the footman out. When he had gone—

"The worst of Norton," Trevivian said, "is that he can't be happy for ten minutes in a room without a woman in it."

Tiplady endorsed this view. They settled down to resume the political talk Norton had interrupted. . . .

§ VII

Joan Stathern, sitting with Countess and Mrs. Trevivian over their tea, heard Mrs. Trevivian's order to the footman; was aware of a nervous inward sensation as the footman departed; and, a few minutes later, saw Norton standing at the door.

She recognised him. She had, naturally, known that she would meet him here. But even without that, she would have recognized him. Absurd, of course. . . .

After all she had gone through. But it was a moment, a meeting she had often lived through in imagination. It had its importance on that account alone. And now it was here.

The mind of an unwedded woman in the late twenties is a dark pool out of which almost anything strange may come. From circumstances or temperament, she has missed something. The ancient clash of the sexes has passed her by. She is conscious that other women, women of coarser calibre, of no spiritual quality, have her at a disadvantage. Later on, virginity and she may be reconciled. But not yet.

Somehow or other, that foolish schoolboy image of Norton at Hammersmith had never been obliterated in Joan Stathern's mind. No other contact had sufficed to do more than dull its outlines. Her life abroad, where desirable males are less common than at home, had perhaps helped to bring this about. Then there was her father. With increasing years he had developed a violent temper, and, together with it, an irrational fondness for her company. The thought that some young fellow was likely to take his daughter away used to drive him mad. Accordingly, very few young fellows visited the Government House and none stayed there long. None, that is, except Rookwith. On Rookwith's cool good-humour and unruffled insolence old Sir Robert's cannonades had made no impression whatever. And in the end, Sir Robert came round. Rookwith was admitted to the tiny circle of the Governor's friends. Joan could have married him—the old man's goodwill even went so far as that. But then, she hadn't loved Rookwith. Sometimes she wondered why, and thought it was a pity. . . .

And now, here was the Hammersmith schoolboy back again in her life, tall, superb, a man of the London world. She was acutely conscious, as he came across the carpet towards her, that the eyes of Countess were watching for signs. Countess was a dear woman, of course. Her intentions were wholly kind. It was a little odd though, after so long, a little uncomfortable—to be at last the subject of somebody's matchmaking campaign.

He had reached the tea-table and was bending over her hand. She was shocked to feel that her face had flushed. She, Joan Stathern, aged twenty-eight, reddening like a *débutante* with pale pink roses in her hair!

The talk over the tea-table took on a different quality. Before Norton's entrance, it had been candid, unveiled, inspired by the matter-of-fact and disillusioned common sense which women exhibit when talking among themselves. Now it became arch, allusive, delicately indirect. The male had appeared. And the females—quite involuntarily, by a process of pure nature—changed their coats. Joan, sitting rather silent, felt that there must be something lacking in her. She only half took part in that involuntary change of personality, and even that half change she found herself resisting. These playful thrusts and parryings, this conversation of hints and references and catch-words she was unfamiliar with—she did not like it, did not understand it. She was a child in the presence of the incomprehensible talk of adults. But *he*—he was in his element. He seemed to be thoroughly enjoying the exchange of elegant fatuities with these towny, insincere ladies. . . .

Abruptly she rose.

"You won't mind if I leave you, will you?" she said. "I have to write a letter before dinner."

They expressed their bantering concern at her departure. Countess looked at her in silent reproach and Mrs. Trevivian said coily:

"Now who can *you* be writing to so urgently, I wonder?"

"My brother."

A titter of surprise. "How devoted!"

"I forgot to put his clean shirts ready for him and he'll be too shy to ask either of the maids where they are. . . . When does the post-bell go?"

Mrs. Trevivian told her. "You can find your room, Joan dear?"

"Yes, thanks."

The door closed behind her compact and businesslike figure.

"A very odd person, Joan," said Countess, half-glancing at Norton. "But very attractive. There's something——" She sought for a word, failed to find it and gave up the quest. "Something about her," she concluded.

Norton did not help. He was thinking of a little untidy garden behind a house in Storey's Gate, where Joan Stathern had once confided to him her secret ambitions—nebulous dreams about savages and building a great house in a foreign land and reigning like a queen. . . . He pondered, in his leisurely Fitzwarren fashion, how much she had realised of all that. Savages enough there must have been in the West Indies, but she seemed to have done very little queening. And as for the ordering of a great house—her brother's shirts appeared to be the type of her present ministrations. Still, Countess was right.

There was "something about her". Fundamentally, she had not changed. Those eager eyes, that downright, steadfast air—the scope of his reflections increased—that cleanbuilt, hard-looking body, like a beautiful boy's, that athletic poise as she had stood by the table, while the futilities about her letter had been going on. . . . Not feminine, not soft, not at all the type of his London affairs.

"A penny for them," somebody said.

He looked up. "I beg your pardon."

"Your thoughts. . . . I offered to buy them," Countess smiled.

He regarded her for a moment with the cool scrutiny of an old friend.

"No," he said, smiling back.

He knew what was in the Countess' mind. . . .

§ VIII

Lord and Lady Flanders arrived in time for dinner—a little too self-conscious, too careful to give the impression that their invitation was the most ordinary thing in the world. Trevivian, at the head of his table, wondered whether, after all, that invitation had been wise. It had, of course, been another Trevivian who had asked them—the loyal, impetuous friend, kind and indiscreet. And it was devilish awkward that the Trevivian who had to entertain them was the climber, the man eaten up with ambition, the politician whom the tar-brush of scandal might ruin.

He sighed. A pity there were two of him. But then there were two of everybody—very often more than two. Those lovers over there—that Flanders couple—he knew very well that, some days, quite frequently indeed, she was a faded, petulant, complaining wife,

and Flanders was a meek, self-justifying husband, driven to take refuge in the bottle. That was what life had done to them, who had loved so greatly and so bravely. That was all the thanks they got for rising above the petty cowardices of habit and convenience. And look at his own case. He had given up everything to resign with Pitt. Only to be ignored. *Ignored*. . . . The bitter obsession began to creep again across his mind.

With an effort he threw it off. Countess, sitting beside him, saw his deep eyes roving over the faces of his guests. They came to rest at last upon her own.

"Marchioness," he said.

She signified attention.

"We are accomplices, you and I."

"Indeed!"

He nodded. "You are seeking to take by storm or stealth the celibacy of Norton Fitzwarren."

"Don't you think that very laudable?"

"Of course. Didn't I say we were accomplices?"

She did not know Trevivian very well and was not sure what his half-serious, half-joking manner meant. So she said nothing, relying on her natural non-committal self-possession to carry her through.

"You are surprised?" Trevivian enquired.

She shrugged delicately.

"I will explain. . . . You have brought here a young lady, sensible, intelligent, manifestly a useful member of society—in a word, the type of woman Norton appears to dislike. Now as you are doubtless aware, there is nothing so potent as mutual dislike—to begin with—for bringing to pass a really thorough-going love-business. The development is infallible."

"You are absurd, Mr. Trevivian!"

"No, Marchioness. I am often misunderstood, that is all. . . . To resume. Having brought our two people together, we proceed to surround them with suitable atmosphere. And that is where I come in. Over there, a little way off, dear lady, are present the actors in a once celebrated love-piece. My house cannot fail to be a house of romance—to-night and to-morrow. Improbable things will be more than possible. The unheard-of will become the commonplace. . . ." He sipped his wine. "Possibly," he added gravely, "Norton will carry her off on horseback."

Countess also sipped her wine. "You are absurd," she repeated.

He turned a mournful serio-comic eye upon her. "So, Marchioness. You have found me out. But you will not expose me?"

"Perhaps you are nearer the truth than you suppose."

"Impossible!"

"They are old lovers."

Trevivian showed traces of alarm. "Lovers? Not Norton and Miss Stathern?"

"Yes, of course."

"But, my dear lady——"

His glance darted across the table. Norton and Joan Stathern were talking over there—she upright, apparently telling him some story or other, he lounging back with a lazy, listening smile.

Trevivian pursed his lips. "But, my dear lady, this is serious."

"You don't think it a desirable match?"

"No. Look at them. Anybody can see she is in love with him."

"Very well, then——"

Trevivian deliberately poured himself some more wine. "You know Norton nearly as well as I do, Marchioness."

"Perhaps I do."

"Only one woman has ever been able to hold him for six months. And now, so far as I can make out, even that woman has lost her hold."

Countess frowned. The picture of Lady Sheen, as she had seen her recently in town, tired, distinguished, with a certain lost, unhappy look about the eyes, crossed her mind.

"This is different," she said.

"How?"

"Joan is a different type."

"Exactly. And she will be nothing more than that to Norton—something different to amuse him—for a time."

She shook her head. "*On ne s'amuse pas toujours impunément.*"

"Perhaps not. But I warn you—Norton is selfish in his loves."

"That is nothing. We are all selfish in our loves."

He smiled. "You are determined, Marchioness. I withdraw."

"You had better, Mr. Trevivian. Because I assure you—you are quite wrong."

She had had the last word. She had not allowed him to dictate to her. But still Countess did not feel entirely comfortable about the scheme which that morning had appeared so very satisfactory. What if she were to precipitate some serious trouble? Countess hated trouble. All her life she had avoided it whenever avoidance had been compatible with her courage and

her indolence. And of course, Trevivian knew Norton very well. Suppose Norton did lead that girl on, to amuse himself?

She wished she had never bothered about Norton and his possible marriage. It was no business of hers. When this visit was over she would go to Trentshire and leave Norton and Joan and the whole affair severely alone. Probably it would die a natural death then. Those two would stop seeing one another. The flame, lacking air, would go out. . . .

She was conscious that Trevivian, beside her, was on his legs. There were to be one or two toasts before the ladies left the table. The diffused hum of conversation diminished and ceased.

"Ladies and gentlemen," announced Trevivian, hesitant, nervous, a little flushed with wine. "I give you—The King!"

The company rose. The candle-light glittered in the upraised glasses. Fidelity, the divine right of kings, the sacred mystery of the blood royal, were solemnly present. . . .

"Our leader, Mr. Pitt! May he soon stand in his rightful place!"

"The old Tory faith!"

The toasts went on and on. The ladies' sips became more and more perfunctory. At length:

"To the memories of the past and the hope of the future!"

Trevivian's voice was loud and clear now, as for some noble declamation. A half-wistful smile played about his mouth. He seemed, in the poetry of the moment, to have forgotten himself. . . . The memories of the past—the hope of the future. . . . Countess, glancing across the table, was aware of Joan Stathern's

eyes upon her, glowing, warmer, happier than she had ever known them before.

§ IX

There are times and occasions when events move with an incredible swiftness. Not, of course, very often. The normal and proper pace of events is leisurely, a mere saunter. Anything more than that is bound to be unnatural, unsound, doomed to reaction sooner or later. The world is constitutionally a pedestrian world, and its good health varies inversely to the rate of what is loosely termed its "progress". And this applies not only in political and scientific affairs, but also in the much wider and more important sphere of human relationships.

So that the glowing happiness which Countess observed in Joan Stathern's eyes, across Trevivian's dinner table, was not perhaps the harbinger of bliss which superficially it might have seemed to be. At the moment, however, the superficial view prevailed. The wine, the pleasant company, the sentimental occasion, saw to that.

After dinner there was dancing for those who danced, cards for such as did not. Everybody made poorish jokes, which everybody else honoured with a generous laugh. The secretive atmosphere of the political gathering, the bumptious airs of the clever party, had no place here. It was Christmas, English Christmas, kept in the way no foreigner can understand. . . .

To Lord Flanders, overflowing with gratitude towards his old friend, the scene was perfect. Seated on a divan, watching the dancers, he considered the rather lonely years since Naples, the years of exclusion

from the pleasures of society. At first the splendours of consummation had filled his life. Margaret—Cheddon's Margaret that had been, now forever his own Margaret—stretched across his horizon, from east to west, blotting out the eyes and tongues of the world. He recalled their first night together, a night at sea, gorgeous, Mediterranean, not of the imperfect quotidian world one knew so well. Nothing that had happened since could ever spoil the memory of that. Nothing—not Margaret's discontents, Margaret's incessant grumbling and fault-finding, not even the quarrels and recriminations, not the sorry retreats they both beat afterwards, she to her boudoir, he to his bottle. . . . All that, he supposed, would go on. That couldn't be helped.

They hadn't been married at first. Cheddon wouldn't divorce. And as a result Margaret's child, a little boy, could never inherit the peerage. He was—outside. She had had no more babies, nor did she seem likely to now. Cheddon, on the whole, had had his revenge. . . . When it had suited him to divorce her, she and Flanders had married, of course. But the old slur remained. They were not as other married people. Others could live apart if they didn't hit it. But he was tied to Margaret by more than a mere legal or religious obligation. Honour, the past, the vindication of that mad flight from Naples, were involved. . . . And, anyhow, irritating as she often was, would any other woman be better? He supposed not. Besides, good chance or evil chance, he loved her. Looking at her to-night, dancing with Trevivian, he thought how fascinating she still was in the soft light of the room, slightly flushed, dressed in one of the new straight-cut gowns that clung to

her pretty figure. (Thank God, he could always pay for whatever she wanted—clothes, houses, everything. Everything, that is, but contentment!) He caught her eye as she went round. It was gentle and full of tenderness for him. Margaret seemed to say "My lover . . . after all. . . ." And Flanders, who had put away the world for love, was comforted, as by cool hands upon his brow. . . .

Some time between midnight and dawn—nobody, except perhaps Trevivian, was clear as to the precise hour, they all separated. There was a final touching of glasses around the dying fire. The chorus of "Good nights," the last jokes, the laughter, echoed away. The old stairs creaked. Doors opened and shut. Fantastic goblins of light and shade created by moving candles passed noiselessly over staircase walls and ceilings. Trevivian had sent the servants to bed and now he himself, his customary final survey over, mounted the stairs. His door banged. Night, silence, satiety, brooded over the old house. . . .

Lady Flanders, in one of the bedrooms, lying wakefully beside the supine form of her husband, became conscious of a desire for a drink of cold water. The night was chilly, the bed warm. Flanders slept.

She sighed. Her desire for water was fast growing to a raging lust. Visions of sparkling rows of tumblers full of the delicious stuff dazzled and tortured her. She felt that her throat was drying up, her lips becoming parched and cracked.

Flanders stirred luxuriously. How nice he had been to-night, how like the old days! If only every day, every night, could be like this. She must try to consider him more, must guard his self-respect, his old, glorious illusions about herself and about their

love. Yes, that was what she would do. After all it was Christmas, the time of rebirth, the season when everyone's sins were forgiven. . . . First, though, she must have a drink of water.

She prodded an accessible portion of Flanders and whispered "Harry," in what seemed to be a suitably pitiful tone.

There was no perceptible reply.

"Harry, dear," she repeated, rather louder.

Flanders, the weight of early sleep upon his eyes, appeared to rouse. An incoherence escaped him. She knew that as yet, however, he was still no further than the borders of consciousness.

"I'm dying for some water, Harry," she entreated. He sighed and turned towards her.

"Dying for what, my dear?"

"Water, Harry."

He appeared to brood over this for a minute or so. She held her breath. Would he reply? Would he just go to sleep? Would Flanders, who had flouted European society for her sake, get out of bed this night to fetch her a glass of water?

There was another sigh, followed by a disturbance of the bedclothes. Flanders had arisen and was fiddling with tinder, trying to light a candle. A dim, rather corpulent ghost he appeared, in his white night-shirt, a mildly profane and muddled ghost. . . . She resisted a sudden desire to laugh and remembered her parched mouth.

"What's the matter, dear?" she encouraged him.

Silence, then: "Where is this water?"

"On the little table, Harry, I expect."

A further silence. The candle flickered. The corpulent ghost moved across the room. At last:

"I can't see any water."

She clicked her tongue with vexation. "Oh, Harry!"

"Did you bring some up?"

"No, dear. I thought some would have been put there."

"Oh."

The ghost seemed to arrive at a decision. She observed it lay down the candle, reach for a pair of plum-coloured dress breeches and draw them up around the white nightshirt.

"I'll see if I can find you some water downstairs," said Flanders.

She saw him open the door, hesitate uncertainly for an instant on the threshold, then plunge forward into the dark acres of the landing. For the moment there was nothing left of that parched throat which had just sent Flanders downstairs on her behalf. She was conscious only of the balm that filled her heart. Flanders was still her lover. His plum-coloured breeches, hanging loose over his knees, were shining armour. His quest, that had been for a glass of water, was strangely become a pilgrimage for the Holy Grail. . . .

She listened for his footsteps, watched for the first signs of the approaching candle, tasted in anticipation the simple love-potion he was bringing her.

At length she heard the creak of a stair. A vague luminosity became apparent, growing gradually brighter. Then, just as the candle was obviously almost level with the door, it paused. There was a faint sound as of some other door opening. A whispered colloquy seemed to take place. Finally she heard Flanders wish somebody Good night, and the candle, with Flanders behind it, reappeared in the bedroom.

He shut the door carefully behind him and shuffled triumphantly forward with the glass of water.

"I had to go to the kitchen," he explained modestly.

"Oh, Harry, how dreadful!"

Flanders, divesting himself of the plum-coloured breeches, made reassuring noises. She sipped the water conscientiously. It was very cold water. The water in those visionary tumblers had been much more satisfying.

"Did anyone see you?" she asked.

He blew out the candle. "Only a mouse."

"I thought I heard you speaking to somebody."

Flanders was busy entrenching himself beneath the sheets.

"Thought what, my dear?" he enquired.

"Outside the door—you were speaking to someone."

"Oh yes, that's right, so I was."

"Who was it?"

"Only Norton."

She frowned. Lord Norton Fitzwarren? But—Taking a last sip of the now thoroughly obnoxious water she reached out and put the glass on the floor at the bedside, then snuggled down close to Flanders. A problem occupied her mind. The frown, invisible in the darkness, was for the moment the sole outward sign of this. At length, however, her cogitations crystallised out in a question.

"What was Lord Norton doing out on the landing?" she asked, low-toned.

The haziness of the reply warned her that Flanders would not long be available for questioning.

"Heard me moving about—opened his door to see whadwas."

"Opened his door? His *bedroom* door?"

"Yes 'vcourse, m'dear. . . . 'Cross the landing——"

"But, Harry dear!"

No response. Lady Flanders abruptly let her falcon fly.

"That's not his room, Harry! That's Miss Stathern's room!"

Regular breathing, gentle and peaceful as an innocent child's, issued from the mound of bedclothes that marked the temporary resting-place of Henry, fifth Baron Flanders.

Outside, over the dark meadows, she heard faintly the crowing of some farmyard cock, heralding a false dawn. . . .

CHAPTER II

THE LAST AFFAIRE

§ I

IN due course, Trevivian's house party broke up. The carriages that had bowled along the road to Windsor bowled back again to London, leaving Trevivian himself to the consideration of his livestock and his grievances, neither of which afforded him the slightest satisfaction.

Norton, with the rest, returned to London. His mother, upstairs in her boudoir at Great Stanhope Street kissed him in welcome.

"How many more times will you come home to me in this house, I wonder?" she said, a little sadly.

He asked her what she was thinking of.

"Oh, nothing, I suppose. Only—I sha'n't last for ever. And perhaps when Mr. Pitt comes back again he may want you to go abroad for him somewhere."

"Mr. Pitt?" He looked at her steadily, uncertain whether or not she knew anything of what was going on behind the political scenes. "Even if Pitt did come back," he said, "I might not be employed. There are so many others."

"I suppose so, Norton. We can only wait." Her voice, he thought, sounded rather weak. She seemed languid, as though she had been unable to shake off the chill that had overtaken her just before Christmas. For an instant, the reflection that "something" might happen to her invaded his mind.

He put the uncomfortable idea brusquely aside.

"I ran into an old acquaintance at Trevivian's," he said. "Do you remember Joan Stathern—Sir Robert Stathern's daughter? Countess knows her very well."

Lady Stone concentrated. Stathern—of course, that girl who kept house for her brother. She remembered now. Countess, or somebody, had pointed her out.

"I didn't know you knew her," she said, guardedly.

"Ever so long ago. In Hammersmith."

Hammersmith? She had never really got to the bottom of all that business. Still, it was too long ago now to bother about. There had been a girl in the affair, however, it seemed. So early as that. . . . She glanced wistfully across at the adored face of her only son. Always, always, there had been some girl, some woman. It was very odd. She herself wasn't like that. Most certainly the Marquis hadn't been like it. But Norton *was* like it. Quite, quite unaccountable. . . .

He was talking about Hammersmith, about the Trevivian party, about Miss Stathern. What a useless life he led, after all! Even though he was her son, she felt that about him. Parties, *affaires du cœur*—some of them, she suspected, not even *du cœur*. . . . If only Mr. Pitt would return to office now, and send Norton away from London and the tangle of its associations. She hated the thought of his going away, out of England. If he went, something told her, she would never see him again. She would die alone and he would read the announcement of her death in some foreign newspaper. Still, no matter. Supposing she were to ask Mr. Pitt, as a personal favour, for the sake of the long and faithful allegiance of Stone. . . .

Norton had paused. Conversationally, with an air of indifference, she said:

"Oh, by the way, Lord Rookwith left a card here yesterday."

Norton seemed hardly surprised.

"You didn't see him?" he enquired.

She shook her head. "I believe he is calling again. . . . I thought you had given him up years ago."

"He's been abroad. Miss Stathern was telling me one or two things about him. She met him in—Jamaica, I believe. He seems to be a colonel in some infantry regiment or other now."

She asked a woman's question. "Is he married?"

"I don't think so."

"I hope he's improved since his schooldays," she said, a trifle ungraciously. She had always nursed a resentful feeling that Rookwith had had a bad influence on Norton—only one of many bad influences, of course, but still, the first, and important on that score alone.

"I gather that he's a very efficient and respected officer," Norton retorted. His bantering smile indicated an inward doubt that Rookwith, however efficient, could ever be deeply respected. Unless, of course, Rookwith had changed.

Lady Stone leaned back in her chair, then restlessly bent forward again to poke the fire. Brushing aside all questions of Rookwith and Miss Stathern, she said:

"I sometimes wish, Norton"—poke—"that you would marry"—another poke, and a vigorous scattering of ash—"some good girl—good family—someone like Morval's wife, perhaps—or that sister of her's—Anne, isn't her name?"

He was astonished. That his mother should be urging marriage, and with a daughter of the notorious Duchess, was more than surprising.

"Marry—Anne Caversham?" he verified carefully.

She met his puzzled smiling eyes with a faint embarrassment, but stuck to her guns.

"Why not? The girls are good, whatever the mother may have been. And Caversham is a great name."

He shrugged. "She might not like me."

"Nonsense! I was watching her at Countess' the other night."

"Watching her?"

"Yes. . . . Besides, mutual respect is what really matters in marriage."

He sat, cogitating. . . . Love, liking, mutual respect—Anne Caversham, virginal, intelligent, slightly acidulated. The niece of Henrietta Sheen—— No, no, it would never do. And apart from that. . . . A shadowy picture of Anne Caversham in his embrace hurriedly crossed his mind. It was unconvincing, absurd—an entirely preposterous picture!

"That's quite impossible, mother," he said at length.

"All right. But you need—somebody."

With a touch of veiled half-malice, "What about Joan Stathern?" he suggested.

She glanced at him fearfully. What did he mean exactly? Had he committed himself with this unknown Stathern girl? What had happened at Trevivian's?

"I don't think that would be very suitable," she said aloud.

He laughed. "Nor do I, mother."

"You weren't serious?"

"Not in the least."

Down in the hall, the bell jangled. A few moments later the solitary footman of Lady Stone's establishment knocked. Norton bade him enter.

"What is it, Morris?" he asked.

"Colonel Lord Rookwith has called, my lord. I showed his lordship into the library. . . ."

§ II

Christmas, winter, passed. Another spring broke in a foam of green about the London squares.

Across the Channel, the Corsican upstart went his unbeaten way. Addington's peace was long past, and Addington, piously and incompetently, was engaged in directing his country in the struggle for the sanctity of Europe. They faced each other: Bonaparte, his set of non-commissioned officers soon to be masquerading as Marshals of France, the dingy republic shortly to become a newly-redecorated gingerbread empire; and on the other side the ancient kingdom, the Mother of Parliaments. . . . Addington. But behind Addington, in the shadows, stood Pitt, and behind Pitt stood the people of England.

For the moment, the upstart was held. His oriental dream, for one thing, was done for. All through the peace, French soldiers had been going quietly out to India in merchantmen. British influence in the East was to give way to French. The tricolour, all being well, would wave over Calcutta and Madras. . . . A beautiful dream, reinforced by sundry not too scrupulous practical measures. But it had gone wrong. Wellesleys, of one sort and another, had seen to that. Assaye definitely finished things.

The upstart rattled the sabre in Europe, threatened here, invaded there. His menace lay over every little

peaceful country between the white seas and the blue. Not that he cared overmuch to lay waste the little peaceful countries. A poor game, that one soon tired of. Only one game, in fact, was really attractive, really worth playing—the humiliation of England. To land at Dover, to march on London, to win a decisive battle somewhere in the Weald. . . . But, for the time being, it wasn't practicable. You had to be content with pin pricks—invading Hanover and so on.

Russia, sitting on the fence, was acutely aware of the sabre-rattling. Hanover, after all, was Germany, and the confines of Germany were not very far from Moscow. The upstart moved quickly when he chose. One day, perhaps quite soon, the sabres would leap suddenly out from their scabbards. Or else, possibly, doves would fly. Doves plumed and spurred, pigeons carrying a dirty bargain. . . . To join with the upstart against England? Or to stand by the side of England in defence of legitimism, loyalty, the old and honourable ways of men and nations?

It was a problem. Meanwhile, the fence was reasonably comfortable. There was no pressing need to get off, one side or the other. And you had all the while the pleasing consciousness of being important, the key to the situation. Austria was feeble, Prussia second-rate, Spain not worth consideration. The future of Europe, it seemed, was to be decided at Petersburg.

§ III

It was odd to have Rookwith about again, to see him nearly every day, just as in the Hammersmith years. Rookwith, however, was a changed man. Not superficially perhaps. Superficially you still saw the insolent, imperturbable grin, the cynicism, the old

easy garment of insouciance. But now and then you came unexpectedly against deeps of character, fissures you could not plumb. Things had happened to Rookwith, many things in many lands, so Norton gathered. There had been that episode in the West Indies; then he had been drafted to Ireland just in time to help to finish off the '98 rebellion; after that, Holland and Egypt. Egypt, apparently, had nearly done for Rookwith. He had slipped well over this side of the tomb. Still, something had pulled him back, some tenacious hope, some desire still unfulfilled. Now he was in England again, with a comfortable regiment, stationed in London and likely to remain there.

All this Rookwith told Norton in brief half-jeering sentences, as they walked through Mayfair together after their meeting in the library.

In shaking hands Norton had noticed that the third finger of Rookwith's right hand was gone.

"Some damned nigger poisoned it," Rookwith explained casually.

Norton pondered.

"You make my life seem rather silly," he said.

"Silly? Why?"

"Useless. . . . I've just been rusting in London, playing the fool, all these years."

Rookwith grunted. "I thought politics were your line."

"So they are. I'm not exactly in the forefront, though. And politics, if you aren't doing some definite work, are a shadowy sort of occupation."

"I suppose so." Rookwith lunged absent-mindedly at the tail of a promenading cat. "Why didn't you get a commission?"

"I did. In the Militia."

"Ah, the Militia!" His tone disposed, for the time being, of the Militia.

Norton was aware of a vague resentment. Damn old Rookwith and his superiority.

"I tried to raise a Trentshire regiment for foreign service too," he added.

"Oh, yes? What happened?"

"Nothing. There was trouble over it at the Horse Guards. I had to give it up."

Rookwith grinned—the ancient sardonic grin. "Damned unfortunate. Still, perhaps it was as well. There's not much charging at the head of your regiment in modern war, you know."

"I presume not." Norton yawned—a trifle ostentatiously. Rookwith, beyond a doubt, was inclined to take liberties.

"Mostly an affair of getting decent beds," he was saying, "and seeing that the men don't starve or steal. Damned little glory."

"Would you change?"

Rookwith shrugged. "No. It's something to do. If I didn't have that, I'd take to fox-hunting or women or something."

The early winter dusk was falling about the streets. A miscellaneous collection of Londoners with coat-collars turned up against the east wind, hurried along the narrow pavements. Two decorous-looking young women wearing similar fur-edged cloaks passed, and the nearer brushed significantly against Rookwith's arm. He paused.

"I beg your pardon, ma'am," he said.

Norton, waiting a few paces off, observed that one of the girls said something *sotto voce* to Rookwith and heard his reply:

"I'm afraid I can't at the moment, ma'am."

A persuasive pout: "Your friend?"

Rookwith called out: "Norton. These young ladies want to know whether you would care to escort them home. They are afraid of the dark. . . . Aren't you, my dears?"

The girls giggled.

Norton said: "Come along, Rookwith. I don't want to be seen talking to street-walkers."

"You see, my dears," Rookwith gravely explained, "my friend also finds himself unable to assist you."

The pretty painted lips flung a couple of derisive remarks at the tall figure standing impatiently aloof.

"No, no, that's quite unjustifiable, ladies," Rookwith remonstrated, with mock indignation. "I've known this gentleman for years. I can assure you——"

But the girls had moved off. Rookwith rejoined Norton.

"You asked for what you got," said Rookwith, who had clearly enjoyed the encounter.

"We might have been seen."

Rookwith appeared to consider this. "I suppose that would matter to you," he said at last.

"Of course. Wouldn't it to you?"

"Not in the general way, it wouldn't."

"I suppose not. You're not so well known in London as I am. But"—Norton halted an instant, then decided to raise a subject he had been keeping in reserve for Rookwith ever since their first handshake—"but suppose somebody who knew you very well saw you talking to those creatures—somebody like Joan Stathern, for example?"

They were passing through St. James's Square. The early stars, in the rich dark blue of the sky,

seemed very bright. From the trees of the square arose suddenly a shrill twittering from hundreds of small birds.

"What the devil are you getting at, Norton?" said Rookwith, stopping dead.

"It just occurred to me."

"But why should it occur to you?"

"I met her a few days ago at Trevivian's."

Rookwith walked on again.

"Who is Trevivian?" he said.

Norton was faintly shocked. Rookwith did not know who Trevivian was. The fact underlined the vastness of the gulf that lay between them now. He explained to Rookwith the importance of Trevivian in the London world, in the Fitzwarren family and among Mr. Pitt's young men.

"Sorry," Rookwith said, when he had finished. "I've rather dropped out, you see."

"You'll soon get to know everybody."

The prospect did not seem to delight Rookwith. "Fancy your meeting Miss Stathern again," he said, after a thoughtful pause.

"She's a distant relation of my sister-in-law."

"I see." Rookwith chuckled. "Do you remember The Fair Unknown, Norton?"

"Yes. You got me into a pretty bit of trouble."

"I like that. Damme, if it hadn't been for me you would never have come within a mile of her. Let alone kiss her in the back yard!"

"In the garden," Norton corrected.

"All right, in the garden, then."

There was an odd, concealed suggestion of bitterness in Rookwith's tone. Joan had said Rookwith used to call at the Government House a great deal

during that West Indian period. Was it possible old Rookwith had fallen in love with Joan? Could it be that he had stumbled on something? It seemed improbable. Rookwith was the kind of person who had many uses for men but only one for women. And yet—a certain impatience in that last phrase had definitely conveyed the impression that Rookwith would give years of life to kiss Joan Stathern in the garden—or, indeed, anywhere else.

“Who told you about that?” he asked Rookwith.

“Her brother. He was looking out of the window.” They both laughed.

“She must be nearly thirty,” Rookwith said.

“She doesn’t look it.”

“She will—soon. That dark sort goes all at once.”

Rookwith’s defences were up again. For the rest of their walk he discoursed upon female faithlessness and instability, the insignificance of the feminine mind and the generally unsatisfactory character of all relations with women.

§ IV

Norton saw Rookwith to his rooms and strolled back through the dark streets. His mother was giving a little dinner and he would be expected to be present. Still there was plenty of time. So often, even in such an idle life as his, the clock was king. You had no time to think, no time to look about and dream and enjoy your leisure, because you were forever a slave to some appointment, some meal or other, something that made you mindless, a mere uneasy clock-watcher.

To-night, dinner or no dinner, he would think. . . .

Rookwith—impressions of Rookwith, erect, military, nearly as tall as himself, passed up and down the

alleys of his reverie. There was a definite sensation of disappointment arising from this meeting with old Rookwith. He hadn't, of course, sought the meeting particularly. But when he heard from Joan that Rookwith was in London the news had interested him. He had looked forward to seeing his old friend again. And now, having seen him and talked to him, he wasn't sure whether it might not have been better to keep the memory of childhood untouched. The man's loose talk, his domineering insouciance, were disagreeable.

And the way he had come to a halt when that mention of Joan had cropped up. That was very odd, say what you would. . . . Oh well, there was no special need to maintain the old friendship. Probably, after all, Rookwith would chiefly go about with the captains and colonels he belonged to. And he, Norton, would continue as before.

Continue as before. . . . That, perhaps, was not so easy. He frowned unconsciously, and the picture of Joan, her hair a dark blur against the pillow, that night at Trevivian's, invaded his mind. That night—so little time ago. It seemed an age. . . . A madness, a supreme madness, going to her room like that. They had both been carried away. He had found her, sleeping. Drunk, he must have been. Not with wine, though. With romance, with old memories. . . . He had heard, quite accidentally, which room was hers—the one just opposite the Flanders'. His own was a few paces along a corridor, in one of the wings. It had been quite simple, so far as mere accessibility was concerned. The door was unlocked and he had gone in, shutting it behind him. That was all.

She might have screamed. There was always the risk of that. And to be found out, in his friend's

house, would have been the end of Norton Fitzwarren. That much was clear. But she hadn't screamed. Afterwards he realised that instinct had assured him of this, before ever he had stepped out of his own room. Joan wasn't the screaming sort. . . . But, after all, why had he done it? He didn't love Joan Stathern. Or, perhaps, did he? The involuntary frown appeared again upon the large smooth brow. . . . Love—all that, he had thought, was over. He had loved Henrietta Sheen. And he had grown out of it, away from her and away from love. Since then there had been merely *affaires*, skirmishes more or less earnest, a well-regulated game that idle men and women played to keep up their interest in life. But Joan—Joan was not an *affaire*. Whatever had drawn him to her room, it had not been the excitement of the familiar game. Something deeper, something from the past. . . . Anyhow, she had been there, asleep. He had looked down at her, then he remembered being on his knees beside the bed, with her hand caressing his hair. She must have wakened, suddenly, without fuss. She had had him at her mercy. But she had merely lain there passive, running her fingers through his hair, while he knelt beside her. Looking up, taking his hands from his face, he saw her, in the quiet gloom, smiling at him serenely. Neither spoke. The entire situation, wildly unreal as it was, she took magnificently for granted. . . . He had cause to be grateful to her. Something or other, some reasonless impulse, had put his future in her lap. And she was letting him off. He had known, beyond the shadow of doubt, even as he stood by her bed, that she would not take advantage. She had, henceforth, a claim upon him, but a claim that she would never press. . . .

Walking home through the windy streets, under the sombre glittering sky, he wondered how he had known this, how the strange conviction had come to him. But he couldn't recall the sensation of the moment. He had gone over the borders, into a country of clearer apprehensions, barriers broken down. And now he was back. The barriers were up again. The moment was over. . . . In his heart, he knew that she had let him go because she loved him. Loved him too much to want to punish him. Too much to claim him for her own against his will.

His mind drew back. A good woman's love, marriage, the end of things. . . . Besides, he wasn't sure that he loved her.

Passing across St. James's Square again, he noticed that the trees were silent. The birds had all flown away. . . . He must hurry. Carriages were beginning to appear numerous about the streets, on their way to people's dinners. He would be late.

As he turned out of the Square he came upon three or four carriages held up by a fallen drayhorse. A man was looking out of the window of the nearest carriage, apparently canvassing the possibilities of moving on—a man with a florid, genial face, now puckered in an anxious frown.

Norton couldn't help recognizing Flanders. Instinctively, without conscious intention, he crossed over the road behind the carriage and walked deliberately up a side turning. He had gone several yards before he could analyse his motives with any certainty. When he did, he pondered for some time on the mental picture of old Flanders, in plum-coloured dress breeches loose about his knees, bearing a candle in one hand and a glass of water in the other. . . .

§ V

There are dark places in every man's make-up, spots of discolouration, unwholesome to the eye. And, at some time or other, they have their effect on his life, and on the lives of the people nearest to him.

In the particular case of Norton Fitzwarren it must be admitted that he behaved very badly to Joan Stathern. He could not help knowing that she was deeply in love with him; he knew, too, that he could never honestly return her love; and yet he allowed the affair to go on and on until at last one of the morning papers went so far as to announce their engagement.

The newspaper report was easily dealt with, the opinion behind it not so easily.

Even then, he did not break away.

For one thing, he did not want to break away. Joan satisfied a need for companionship that he had felt acutely since he no longer went very regularly to Mortlake and Cavendish Square. She was friendly, intelligent, essentially companionable. She rode well, talked sufficiently, was a good listener. They liked the same things. And so he formed the habit of calling at her brother's house for an afternoon's exchange of gossip and comment just as formerly he had called at Henrietta Sheen's.

She was, of course, unusually placed. Her parents were dead, her relations apparently indifferent to her. The brother she kept house for, a bookish retiring man who only wanted to be let alone, hardly seemed to be aware why Norton kept calling or even that he called at all. She had no husband to curb her comings and goings, no intimate friends to criticize or suggest. It was an almost unique position. Fortunately the

sturdy straightforwardness of her personality seemed to ensure her safety. Joan Stathern was somehow not easily associated with ideas of passion.

January, February slipped by. He saw her several times a week. Generally they sat tête-à-tête together drinking tea, talking, laughing over old days and mutual acquaintances. And when he left the house, he always took her hand without the faintest gesture of anything more than friendship. Indeed it may be confidently asserted that at this time he did not desire anything more than that.

Then, one afternoon, in the early days of March, he was made aware that things could not go on in this delicately platonic fashion any longer.

Business had taken him to Kensington and he had walked back across the Park, making a slight detour in order to call at the house in Hill Street where Joan lived with her brother. The afternoon sun, about four o'clock, had given way to cloud and a chilly wind, and the wide grey-green spaces of the Park were mournful with the first hint of dusk. Of course, she was in. (In those days, she was always in, waiting for him.) And it seemed somehow more than customarily pleasant to-day to reach her cosy front room, the room where the fire and the books and the comfortable, worn furniture were already ominously familiar. He was tired with his walk, and the strong breeze, blowing off the Serpentine, had made him drowsy. Joan gave him tea and little cakes, and they talked of the opera and of young Kean, the new actor who was making such a stir.

Before they were aware of it, twilight had invaded the room.

"I must be going," he said, half-heartily.

Joan shrugged—an unusual gesture for her.

“You are always going.”

“I’m a busy man, Joan.”

“Nonsense!”

He laughed. “Well, what’s the time?”

“I don’t know.”

She seemed nervous and overstrained, he thought. “Your clock seems to have stopped,” he said aloud, peering towards the mantelpiece.

She nodded. “I dropped it this morning.”

Dropped the clock! That was odd for a girl like Joan.

“I make it six o’clock,” he said, holding up his watch to the light.

She came near to the sofa where he was sitting. “It can’t be as much as that.”

“Look then.”

She took the watch. After a moment: “Yes, I’m afraid that’s right.”

Her voice sounded wistful. He rose, went towards his hat and greatcoat, which he had flung over a chair, then abruptly turned back. That note of wistfulness in her voice still echoed across his mind.

“Joan,” he said.

“Well?”

“That night——” He halted.

“You ought not to refer to that.”

“Only this once. I have never asked your pardon. And it was unpardonable. . . . Do you forgive me?”

A long silence. Her figure was a dark silhouette against the pale square of the window. He could not see her face.

At last he heard a voice say:

“But I was glad you came.”

He had no words to answer her. The imminence of the inevitable appalled and fascinated him. A piece of blazing coal fell from the fire on to the hearth, and he saw her face in profile as she turned for a moment to glance at it. Then the voice said again:

"When you went away, I cried."

He felt himself walking slowly towards her, his footsteps falling soundless on the carpet. Now they were face to face.

"You—cried?"

He saw her grave nod.

"Why did you?"

"I don't know."

Outside, somebody passed. The deliberate tread came near, drew level with the window, then gradually faded out.

"I suppose I cried because you didn't want me," she said. "Because I wasn't a young girl any longer. I seemed to have missed—such a lot. All the best things——"

He reached for her hand, that hung straight and limp beside her.

"Joan," he said again.

A nervous shudder passed through her. She waited for him.

"I never dreamed, Joan——"

Something made him pause. Other scenes, not like this one—scenes in the game, scenes of mock-protest, the old farce of unwilling surrender, crept back to confuse him. His mind, blurred by the keen wind, worked sluggishly, haltingly.

Joan's voice came suddenly again out of the darkness.

Hardly above a whisper, "There was never anyone but you," she said.

The words were final. Like a shrill trumpet they cried out that things as they had been were over.

At first softly, then at last baying open-throated, the Wild Beast, the Ancient Beast, prowled up and down the little room. . . . In the dim light, by the red ashes of the fire, Norton could feel her kisses urgent upon his eyes and mouth. . . .

§ VI

In spite of their not very satisfactory first meeting, Norton continued to see a good deal of Rookwith. That gallant colonel's regiment did not appear to make great inroads upon his leisure, and he became quite a notable, though transient, figure of the London season. He was to be found at Belgravia House, where his military manners and sincere indifference to the conventions of drawing-room talk were like a piquant sauce to the Whig ladies. After the brilliant defeatism that they had always listened to, Rookwith's conversation had a spice of naughtiness in it. It no longer excited the Belgravia House ladies to hear verbal improprieties of the customary sort, but the improprieties of warlike sentiments (for one season, at any rate) were definitely amusing.

However, it was not at Belgravia House that Norton met Rookwith. When he saw him it was generally at the theatre, at the opera, or at one or other of the fashionable Tory dining-tables. Most of all, he saw him at Flanders' tennis court in Kensington.

Lord Flanders had built his tennis court to keep his fat down. It had cost him a great deal to make and it still cost him a considerable sum to maintain.

Tennis courts are like that. Still, money didn't matter to Flanders. Peace of mind did. And he found that he could achieve peace of mind almost as easily in his tennis court as over his bottle. He played badly and perspired freely. His court was, however, far and away the best in or near London, and tennis-playing friends who had not been near him for years, frequently found their way to his house, for the sake of old times and the chance of a game.

Among these was Norton, whose tennis, since Oxford and early London days, had been very intermittent—chiefly in deference to Lady Stone's wishes. Thus far, the old law of the darkened room still ran. Even now, he never told his mother when he had been playing. He went out in his curricule a good many mornings, she rarely asked whither, and if he came back looking tired, it could generally be set down to the strain of the driving or to a late sitting at the House the night before. In family life, where the old authorities of parents over children are unwisely but almost invariably prolonged, after a fashion, into the children's maturity, white lies are legal tender.

Anyhow, it was at Flanders' tennis court at Kensington that Norton met Rookwith, after the evening of the St. James's Square incident. He was surprised.

"I didn't know you knew one another," he said to Flanders.

Flanders explained that, up to a few days before, they hadn't known one another.

"Rookwith did me a little service a couple of nights ago," he added gravely. "I was in difficulties on the pavement, rather late. There was nobody about—except myself, that is. And I was, as I say, on the pavement——"

"In the gutter," corrected Rookwith.

"All right. In the gutter, somewhere in Piccadilly."

Rookwith said: "Half-way up Bond Street."

"Was it? Anyhow, to put it briefly, I had been trying to cure a fit of depression. In fact, I had done so, when Rookwith found me."

"He was singing hymns," said Rookwith.

Flanders smiled. His smile intimated plainly that he did not regret the episode. If a gentleman wished to use the gutter of Bond Street to sing hymns in at night, very well—nobody was any the worse and he, Flanders, had gained a friend.

"What about a game?" he suggested. "I'll watch you two, if you don't mind."

They demurred politely, took their coats and waistcoats off and chose rackets.

Tennis—old royal tennis, not the game played on lawns—is a fast affair. Norton and Rookwith faced one another, finished the preliminary knock-up and, French fashion, saluted with the racket. Thenceforward, tension reigned. Flanders sat near, throwing in an occasional involuntary exclamation as he watched the game. Beyond this, the only human sounds were grunts, short laughs, the tokens of exertion, satisfaction and vexation. The balls pinged on the tight-strung rackets, banged on the grill, rumbled along the penthouse. Rookwith, without any style to speak of, played a furious game. His attack was violent, his volleying an affair of cold ferocity. Norton found his imperturbability hard pressed. In the old days he had been reckoned one of the six best tennis players in London. And now he was losing to the barbarous tactics of Rookwith. He set his

jaw. Gradually, old tricks, subtleties not entirely lost, returned to him. His shots landed in unexpected places. Rookwith's straight game was baffled, and Rookwith himself grew more and more violent and overwhelming. . . .

Norton won the set.

They mopped their brows and shook hands.

"You play a poisonous game, Norton," Rookwith gasped.

"The flower of my wasted youth," panted Norton.

"Devilish clever, all the same."

"Practice. While you were killing niggers, I was trying *frolés*."

Flanders said: "When it comes to a game of tennis or a woman——"

He stopped short. "Hello, my dear," he exclaimed cordially. Behind Norton's back a door had opened. Lady Flanders stood there, with the martyred expression of a discontented person virtuously repressing her discontent but determined not to let the fact pass unnoticed.

"Oh, *there* you are, Harry," she said: and then, "Why, Lord Norton, how hot you look!"

"This is Lord Rookwith," Flanders announced, rising.

Rookwith bowed.

"We've been playing tennis," he informed Lady Flanders confidentially.

"Indeed!"

"Yes, Lord Norton has been beating me."

She turned her pathetic, pseudo-helpless gaze upon Norton.

"Have you *really*, Lord Norton?"

"Luck, Lady Flanders,"

"You are too modest."

He laughed. "Lord Rookwith will take his revenge next time."

"I'm not so sure." She regarded him with inscrutable archness. "I'm afraid you're one of the quiet ones that give nothing away."

He pretended to be taken aback. Everybody laughed, but there was an undercurrent of uneasiness in their laughing. Abruptly Lady Flanders looked across at her husband, and said: "Oh, Harry!"

Flanders' round face was all attention.

"I had almost forgotten what I came to ask you for."

"What was that, my dear?"

"Oh, nothing really. Only—I was issuing some invitations for dinner next week and I thought it would be jolly if we asked that nice Miss Stathern to come—the one we met at Mr. Trevivian's. But I haven't her address, you see."

There was a pregnant silence, in which Lady Flanders looked from one to the other with her worried, babyish charming smile.

"I'm afraid I don't know, my love," Flanders said at length.

Norton glanced at Rookwith, but Rookwith's sardonic features were blank and unhelpful.

"I believe," he equivocated carefully, "that she lives in Hill Street. Number 56, I *believe*."

Lady Flanders thanked him.

Afterwards, thinking back, he puzzled for a long time over the recollection of the rather odd expression, not quite mocking or malicious, yet nevertheless vaguely hostile, that had seemed to lurk in Lady Flanders' large and innocent eyes.

§ VII

A couple of days later, when he called at Hill Street, Joan said:

"Rookwith was here this morning."

He took his time—as generally—to answer. At length, looking up at her from his contemplation of the fire,

"I'm not surprised. I gave him your address."

"But why?"

"Why not?"

She was clearly vexed. "Oh, nothing. . . . I didn't particularly want to keep up that friendship, that's all."

He explained what had happened at Flanders' place.

"I don't like Lady Flanders," Joan said. "She's a mischief-maker."

He laughed indulgently. "No more than most ladies in her circumstances, I suppose."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, you know the romantic story, don't you?—and you can see what is left of it."

She frowned at him over the débris of her household accounts, that she had been engaged upon when he arrived.

"Still, I don't understand."

"Lady Flanders has a shallow nature—the kind of nature that perpetually craves excitement. It ruined poor Flanders' life. Now it has to find other fields."

Joan mused.

"Could she do *you* harm, do you think?"

"How?"

"Spreading scandal—all that sort of thing?"

He considered. There had been so much scandal

about him, these past two years, that a little more could hardly make any difference. He did not say this to Joan, however.

"What are you thinking of?" he asked, guardedly.

She came slowly away from the table to the fire and, without warning, sat down on the hearthrug beside him. Glancing up, she could see the firelight mirrored in his eyes.

"I only wondered——" she began.

He waited for her.

"You know—that night—— Wasn't that Lord Flanders you ran into on the landing?"

"Yes. But Flanders didn't know one bedroom from another—except his own. He thought I had come out to see what the noise was."

"But—*she*——"

"She was in bed and asleep—so far as I know."

The long trail of that episode at Trevivian's occupied their minds in silence for a few minutes. Then Joan looked up again.

"If it got about, it *would* do you harm," she said.

He made no comment.

"Politically, I mean," she added.

He smiled down at her. "If it isn't too bad, that sort of affair doesn't matter much to a man's career."

"But—under your friend's roof—with your friend's guest——"

He permitted himself a brusque movement of distaste.

"Don't let's talk about it," he said.

The word was a command. They discussed other things. But there were uncertain gaps in their conversation. A shadowy third, that might have been Lady Flanders, was with them in the room. . . .

§ VIII

About that time there went one night to old Lord Calne's fireside in Spring Gardens, a small deputation of young men—of, to be precise, Pitt's young men. Norton went, and, naturally, Trevivian. There were two others, whose names do not matter.

The object of their visit to the old diplomat was, ostensibly at least, to seek advice—that is to say, to obtain confirmation of their own views, this being the only sort of advice people ever really do seek. And their views were that the ship of State was plainly in the most serious danger. The Addingtonian Tories, well-meaning mediocre incompetents to a man, had no sort of grip on the helm. The boat was drifting and the pilot was apparently indifferent to the fact.

The deputation put these points very strongly and enquired what Lord Calne thought about them. He, as a sort of Nestor among the Pittite young men, was hunted on for guidance. Did he think it right for Mr. Pitt to lurk at Walmer when he was wanted at Westminster? If not, what was to be done to get him out of his hole? Moreover (this from Trevivian) was there any sense in Mr. Pitt's command that the Addingtonians should not be attacked in the House? If so, Trevivian would be glad to know where exactly the sense lay. And, to sum up, did not Lord Calne think a good purpose might be served by a petition to Mr. Pitt to resume office? They, the deputation, would undertake to prepare the petition. The entire population of the country (or such of it as could write) was, Lord Calne gathered, thirsting to sign.

Lord Calne, one supposes, drew his thin right hand across his mane of silky white hair and gazed with

friendly, only faintly ironic eyes at the young men around his study mantelpiece: Trevivian, nervous, impatient, exclamatory; Norton, a tall figure in the background, aloof, saying little; the other two, Parliament men, apt to make speeches on small provocation. There is no record of the advice he gave them, nor even that he gave them any. Doubtless he accorded them the courtesy of his serious attention. They were young, in earnest. They thought they were anxious for the future of their country, and, if in fact it was perhaps their own future they were really anxious about, the mistake was excusable, on the grounds of their youth and of the intrinsic complexity of all political issues.

It is sufficient to note here that he listened to them, replied according to his nature and training, and sent them away satisfied that, whilst there was much to be said for a petition, they ought to trust their master a little longer. Lord Calne always conveyed an impression that he *knew* things. All sorts of people did, in fact, come to visit him, and the house in Spring Gardens, whither he retired when failing health had driven him at last from diplomacy, was rightly understood to be a place of many confidences, much knowledge of the future, a spot where various dark things were likely to be made plain. So that the deputation was perhaps justified in supposing that, though Mr. Pitt chose not to reveal his mind to themselves, he probably admitted Lord Calne into the sacred precincts; and, this being so, the reply they had received might be regarded as satisfactory. They were to trust the Master. Very well—then presumably, beneath the muddy surface, a clear strong tide was, after all, flowing their way.

They thanked Lord Calne and prepared to depart. He excused himself from accompanying them to the

front door, pleading his age and the misty night air. As they left, however, Norton heard himself called back, and looking round, he saw his old friend standing at the door of his room.

"I sha'n't keep you a moment," Lord Calne said.

He shut the study door behind Norton and went back to the hearth. The leaping flames outlined his fragile figure in gold.

"Do you still gamble much, Norton?" he said, without preliminaries.

Norton smiled. What the devil could old Calne be driving at?

"Not much, sir."

"Drink?"

"I never drank much."

Lord Calne nodded. Then——

"You have—*affaires*?"

"*Affaires*?"

"Of the heart, as they are called. With women."

The old diplomat observed a familiar haughty expression cross the regular features—the expression that long ago he had described as Norton's "reigning prince" air.

"With women," he repeated firmly.

The manner of sulky pride gave way. The half-smiling disdainful eyes became obscurely troubled.

"I suppose there have been some, sir."

"And still are, I suppose?"

A shrug: "Yes."

Lord Calne came forward. "You must not be angry with me." He placed a white, delicate hand on Norton's coat-sleeve. "I have been an ambassador or in the service of ambassadors—all my life. There are three things that ruin ambassadors—a loose

tongue, and gaming, and women. They ruin other men, too, but that is not so important. Ordinary men are only accountable to themselves. The ambassador stands for his country. . . . Talking, gaming, and women, Norton; and the most dangerous of the three——”

He did not finish, except by a gesture of the white hand.

“To me, you mean?” Norton said.

“To nearly every man.”

“But—I don’t understand, sir.”

“That is probably so, Norton.”

“But——”

Lord Calne opened the study door again.

“Good night, Norton—— You must not keep your friends waiting. . . .”

Outside in the street, Trevivian and the others were walking away. He looked after them for a moment, then hurried off in the opposite direction. . . . Ambassador. . . . He didn’t feel he wanted to listen to Trevivian’s talk this evening. How much did old Calne know? Why had he talked in that strain if he didn’t know something definite?

The streets were quiet. He walked on and on, thinking. From habit, he passed along Hill Street, but Joan’s house was silent and lightless. . . . Ambassador, leaving England, leaving London, leaving Hill Street. . . .

Abruptly, he was conscious of exasperation. After all, old Calne might know nothing. Old men in their dotage talked wildly.

Fetching up at Great Stanhope Street quite late he let himself in and went to bed.

He slept restlessly. During the night, at some

vague hour before the dawn, he woke with the impress of a vivid dream fresh upon his mind. Old Calne had been taking him back to Hammersmith to school again but when they reached Doctor Pulteney's, it turned out to be the little front room at Hill Street and Joan was there and Rookwith. Somehow one of those desperate and disgraceful quarrels began that nice people only have in dreams, a sickening mêlée without reason or decency. Then, after a time, that finished and was followed by a different sort of dream, that, when he awakened, he could not recall.

For a long while he lay with eyes closed, trying to recapture the detail of that last fragment of his dream. At last he seemed to connect it with an old memory of the Grand Tour—the Princess he had met at Petersburg—What was her name?—and her little girl who had sallow cheeks and full lips and was rather superior and disagreeable. . . . No, that couldn't be it. He must have got on the wrong track. Painfully, foot by foot, he began to retrace his steps. But the dream still eluded him. The cloudy outlines were gone. In a few minutes, sleep, calm now and dreamless, reclaimed him.

When he woke again it was light and he had a headache.

§ IX

One morning in the early May of that year he went out riding with Joan. Though she rode well, she rode infrequently, for she had no horses of her own and the livery stable steeds were a mixed lot. Still, sometimes, when the day was fine and Norton brought a good-looking hired horse round to her door, she went out with him. People saw her go out with

him, and mentioned it in conversation. Joan knew very well that she was damned for ever in the London world, and she did not care.

So this morning, as Norton had picked a promising mare for her, they rode together, Richmond way.

He knew the roads of that district well—better than he really liked. They were bound up with memories of Lady Sheen, old fevers, old joys. The turn of a lane, the shape of a clump of trees, had a certain significance.

Something—perhaps the sadness that Spring gives to the heart—made them rather silent.

Desultorily, at intervals, they spoke of Hammersmith, and of that episode of childhood with which the sights and sounds of Hammersmith were associated.

"I never forgot you," she said, following a long and thoughtful pause.

"Nor I you."

She shook her head, smiling to herself.

"What does that mean?" he questioned her.

"Nothing."

"Yes, it did."

"Well—I only thought that you didn't remember me in the way I remembered you."

He drew in to the hedge to let a lumbering farm-cart pass. When it had gone by,

"That's not fair," he said.

She glanced at him. "I can't prove it, I know. But——"

"But what?"

"After me, Norton—after that little girl at Twisletons—there were so many others."

He offered no comment.

"Weren't there?" she pressed.

"I don't know what to say."

"Say the truth."

"Well then—I suppose there were."

He sought vaguely to justify himself. "We've been over all that," he said. "Besides, women are different."

"I might have married."

He frowned, and pulled at the reins. An idea occurred to him.

"Does Rookwith come to Hill Street much?" he asked.

"Quite often."

A pause. "He wants to marry you, doesn't he?"

Very quietly, without looking at him, "Yes," she answered.

"Why don't you let him?"

"I don't know—— Oh, what's the use of talking about it?"

"He's one of the best of men. . . . Under his queer manner, I mean."

"Yes. That's true."

"You could make him very happy."

Again she shook her head. "I wouldn't be certain of that."

They had reached the bridge at Richmond—the limit of their ride—and for a few minutes they stayed there, resting the horses. All around—for the Spring had come unusually late that year—seagulls wheeled and screamed.

"Did you bring any bread with you?" she asked.

He smiled. "No," he said shortly.

"They're greedy wretches," he added.

"Hungry," she corrected him. "Wild, hungry birds."

He stole a glimpse at her, brooding there in the sunshine that fell on her brown, determined face. The spangled, glittering water was running high; along the banks the golden-green poplars seemed to drink in the warm light; a barge floated down from somewhere higher up, laden with sand. They stood watching as, steadily and serenely, it rounded the bend, coming nearer and nearer until it slid at last through the shadowed water between the piers of the centre arch.

"I wonder how far that goes," he remarked.

She made no suggestions.

"Would you leave England, if you had the chance?" she said at length.

He considered. "I don't know. Why?"

"I would," she said. "If I had any money."

"The old idea?"

"I suppose so. London has nothing to give me."

He murmured dissent. "I love London," he said, with emphasis.

"I don't think——" she looked at him with an odd expression—"I don't think you know what *love* is, Norton."

A gull, wheeling around them, perched daringly for an instant upon the stone balustrade, then jumped off again and was lost in a swirl of other similar gulls.

"We'd better be getting back," he said.

They turned the horses' heads. . . .

All the way home he talked political gossip. He would not, he was resolved, encourage Joan in sentimentalities. As long as they were playing happily together, he was content. But when, as happened sometimes—this morning, for instance—he was brought up against the recognition that for her there was no

beauty, no colour, no sun in the world, without him—he was filled with uneasy regrets. He was not a vain man. He would have given much to know that Joan Stathern did not care for him. But he knew that she did care, and that, one way or another, he was bound to hurt her.

He wondered whether, without realising it, he had not perhaps hurt women before. Though indeed, in those other ephemeral affairs of his, the women had been married, mostly shallow, concerned only to dissipate the tedium of their lives. And he had taken a risk there too. He might have had to face a man's pistol over any one of those women. The knowledge had added a spice. There had seemed nothing very discreditable in a transaction that you might have to stake your life on.

But this was another matter. He had taken advantage of Joan. She was, essentially, very lonely. Nobody would get up early to fire a pistol on her account. And what she had given him, her heart had given and not her boredom.

It was an impossible position. He couldn't, when he thought about it, see where it would end.

But there were, happily, only comparatively infrequent occasions when he needed to think about it. Joan did not often lead the way into talk that provoked these heart-searchings. Generally they both enjoyed the moment as it passed. And in the smallish front room at Hill Street, in spite of the convictions of the London world, scenes of passion were very rare. It seemed to be understood between them that one loved more than the other—even, perhaps, that the other did not love at all.

Unsatisfactory as the relationship necessarily was

in the light of reason and common sense, it continued. People wondered. People talked. The newspaper paragraph announcing the engagement appeared; and Joan, with all the rest of the world, saw it.

I imagine that she read it with a certain wistfulness. After all, she had it in her power to make it true. A word, an appeal to his honour—the thing was done. But then, the connubial years, the dust and the ashes, the fear of his veiled resentment. . . . Better leave things as they were. At least, now, he would never grow to hate her.

§ x

To this attitude, this final refuge, it had been the lot of Lady Sheen also to come. Both women loved him; both had suffered and would again suffer, because of it; both had been defeated.

But, despite this superficial resemblance their places in his life were very different. There had been a time when he had passionately desired Henrietta Sheen. She had moulded his youth, had dominated, for long years, the tenor of his daily existence. And no defeat could ever entirely erase the tokens of her influence upon him.

To Joan Stathern, another lot was assigned. She had indeed been his first love. In her he had first become aware of the mystery of womankind. And I suppose there is a certain importance in that, of a more or less tenuous kind. Then, unfortunately perhaps, she had come back into his life, to fill a new rôle.

An odd destiny and pitiful—to have been his first love; and then to become, at the end of it all, merely—his last *affaire*!

§ XI

When he reached Great Stanhope Street, after the ride to Richmond, a note was waiting for him—brought by hand during the morning, it appeared.

The note was brief and uncharacteristic, for it was from Trevivian, who had a weakness for writing long letters.

It ran:

“A. is *out*.—T.”

Such moments are the test of aristocracy. It may be set down without hesitation that Norton's facial expression was entirely unaffected by the perusal of Trevivian's note. He read it through twice, disposed of his hat and coat without haste and went to seek Lady Stone.

His mother—as usual in these days—was in her boudoir. There was a fire in the grate although the weather was so fine, and he found her sitting huddled over the blaze—so far, that is, as her rigid sense of decorum permitted her to huddle.

He stooped to kiss her.

“What do you think of this, Mother?”

She took the sheet of notepaper from his hand and fumbled for her glasses.

“‘A. is out’,” she read deliberately. And then: “Oh, Norton—my dear boy!”

They looked at one another and he saw that her eyes slowly filled with tears. He did his best to ignore the deeper, more personal implications of the message.

“That finishes the Addington gang,” he said. “What will happen now, I wonder?”

She smiled at him through her tears. "My dear boy, how absurd! Only one thing could happen, that I know of!"

"Yes, I suppose Pitt will come back now."

"You *suppose*, indeed!"

She became quite heated. He ought, she told him, to have been round at Mr. Pitt's house this minute, instead of loafing in his mother's room. And if he hadn't been out riding, he would have got the note earlier, and might have put his claims before Mr. Pitt hours ago.

"I'm not going to pester Pitt this morning," he defended himself.

"All right, then. People who don't make themselves a nuisance get forgotten."

He laughed at her vehemence. Women, even the best of women, seemed oddly lacking in propriety, when it came to a matter of this sort.

"Pitt must do as he thinks," he said.

"You had better go round."

"No. He'll be so busy." He could not say to his mother, good soul, that he would not be suspected of touting. She would not have understood. In her world, people sometimes intimated that their past services and the past services of their relations merited some recognition, but they did not tout. "I'll go over and see if Lord Calne is in," he added, to placate her.

She sighed. "Your father always said that your diffidence would undo you."

He kissed her again and went out, thinking how much thinner she had become lately. A little—well, *difficult*, too, at times. As though she were ill, or fretting. . . .

At Spring Gardens, he was told that Lord Calne was not at home. The sunshine had tempted him out. On such a day, too, when everyone was saying to everyone else that Addington was out, and the town buzzed with rumours of novel appointments and strange coalitions, it was impossible to stay by one's own fire-side. A change of ministry is a cheap enough affair in sophisticated, disillusioned, democratic times. But when the world of society and the world of politics are one, things are very different.

Norton, at a loose end, strolled up to Piccadilly, where he met Morval.

Morval said: "I suppose you've heard."

Norton replied that he had.

"Once upon a time, I should have been very excited," Morval added, a trifle wistfully.

"Your diffidence has been your undoing, Morval. It's a family trait, I'm afraid."

Morval regarded his relative uncertainly. "You're marked out for something, I suppose?"

"Not that I know of."

"I expect you'll get something."

A clattering dray passed by, forcing a hiatus in the conversation. Morval watched it with a melancholy air.

"I've just come from Belgravia House," he added, when talk became possible again. "I had to take a message to Anne from my wife. They were making up cabinets there. They said Pitt would give you a diplomatic post."

"He's not in yet, you know."

"Not much doubt, is there?"

"There's going to be a strong Opposition. Some of us were trying to get Fox in with Pitt—and the

Grenvilles too. Their tails weren't to be salted, though."

Morval nodded. "Things aren't going to be too easy. Still—at a time like this, with the country at war, and so forth——"

He tailed off. It was clear that he would have liked, this morning, to have his name on people's lips in the way that Norton's was.

They shook hands. He was a good sort, was Morval, Norton reflected, as he made his way through Mayfair. These domestic, unambitious men—the back-bone of the country. . . . The patronisingly generous tone of his thought surprised and offended him as he considered it. He was a damned fool, counting his chickens in that way. And other people were fools for furnishing him with the chickens to count. Time enough to be patronising when something definite had happened. Still, all this talk, following on old Calne's cryptic remarks that night at Spring Gardens——

He became aware, as he walked along under the wall of Lansdowne House, of a tall figure coming down the slope of Berkeley Square from the direction of Hill Street.

The figure came nearer, grinned broadly and revealed itself as Colonel Lord Rookwith. As it drew level, it bowed to the ground, with an excessive and oriental sweep.

"Hail, O King!" it declaimed sonorously.

Norton said: "Hello, Rookwith. What's the matter with you?"

"An attack of deference, Norton." Then: "You know, of course, that Addington is out."

"Yes. All the town knows."

"I suppose so. I didn't, until a few minutes ago. A

rough soldier like myself has nothing to do with politicians—statesmen, I should say—except to take their orders and try to carry out their damnable plans. . . . I knew in a vague way, of course, that a Mr. Addington was Prime Minister. That, however, was all I knew about him until I heard, this morning, that he was out."

"You'll get some work to do now," Norton said.

Rookwith stroked his cheek contemplatively with a gold-headed cane.

"Work?" he repeated vaguely.

"Fighting. Pitt won't sit still as Addington has been doing."

"I see." He gazed upwards at the delicate green foliage of the trees in the garden of Lansdowne House.

"And what do *you* get out of this?"

"I have no idea."

Rookwith affected an elaborate archness. "Come, come, Norton."

"No, really."

"Very well. But I don't believe you. This time next week you'll probably be the damned War Minister, thinking out a lot of damned unworkable schemes for sending poor devils like me on some godless fool's errand against the French!"

Norton smiled uneasily. You could never be sure whether Rookwith's violence was real or only badinage. This morning, there seemed to be more than a hint of wormwood and gall in it.

"Don't be bitter, Rookwith," he said.

Rookwith's eyes ranged from the leaves in the trees overhead, round the tall houses of the Square and back to Norton's face.

"You shouldn't grudge a poor soldier a little bitterness," he replied at length.

His queer, unhappy gaze was at rest for only a moment, then it went off again, roaming the Square.

"Horace Walpole lived in that place over there," he announced abruptly.

He scowled at the house for some minutes. Finally—

"Just like the old devil to have those long, thin peep-round-the-corner windows," he said.

His vague resentment, apparently slaked by this unprovoked attack upon the late Lord Orford, seemed to peter out. With the old impenetrable grin, he shot forth a brown right hand from which the third finger was missing.

"Good-bye, Norton," he said. His voice was quiet, unsteady.

They shook hands and Norton wished him good-bye.

The tall loose-built figure swung round the corner, along the wall of Lansdowne House, and out of sight.

§ XII

A few days later, Mr. Pitt returned to power, and Addington departed towards the comparative obscurity which best suited his qualities. The Government was reconstituted. Trevivian became Treasurer of the Navy—a minor post which was understood to be only a stepping-stone; Susan's Hemingby went to the Foreign Office; Boreland, one of those Talleyrandish politicians who somehow find a place in whatever Government happens to be governing, stayed where he was. Norton, for some months, seemed to have been forgotten.

These things are known. Documentary evidence authenticates them on every side. They need not be emphasised here.

It is with Norton that I am concerned, He seemed, as I say, to have been "passed over". People began to suppose that they had been mistaken in their estimate of his standing with Mr. Pitt. And indeed it was full summer before his appointment was at length announced and himself gazetted as a Privy Councillor.

Political phenomena are capable of being accounted for in many ways, only one of which is strictly correct. There is a prevalent idea that politics are secret and difficult to fathom, that every surface movement "means" something, is the result of some long chain of subterranean transactions of which the uninitiated must be ignorant for ever—or, at least, until the Letters and Journals of the transactors are revealed to the world. I do not know how far this idea is correct; but I have a strong suspicion that most political events are fortuitous, haphazard, and only brought into the semblance of a design long afterwards, when the dust of conflicting detail has eddied away. So that it may very well be that the delay in Norton's appointment to the Russian Embassy, and the further delays that occurred after his appointment, were all quite accidental, arising out of the unimportant routine of political and diplomatic affairs.

Whether or not this was so, people talked. It was said in London, that summer, that Pitt couldn't make up his mind to trust Lord Norton Fitzwarren with such an important mission. Any pretty woman, the assumption was, could get at the secrets of such a plenipotentiary by the most usual of feminine wiles. And a

gambler, too—going to a country where gambling was the national vice!

Still, he went, that Autumn. His mission was, quite simply, to gain over Russia. Bonaparte, who had been the Corsican and who now was Emperor, was rattling the sabre with ominous impatience. The young Czar was serious-minded, anxious to do what was right, and therefore susceptible to persuasion. And Norton's instructions were to head him off from any thought of an alliance with France. So much is certain.

§ XIII

What, however, is by no means so certain or so easily explicable is the behaviour, at this juncture, of Rookwith and Joan Stathern. Rookwith concealed whatever emotions he might have experienced beneath his usual screen of cynical hard-bitten badinage. He went much to Flanders House, where Lady Flanders, to all appearances, had succeeded the Duchess of Belgravina in his favour. Norton saw little of him, for Norton, during these months, was a great deal in the company of political persons, with whom Rookwith did not consort.

As for Joan Stathern, she could keep a secret when she chose, and, besides, was rather a friendless soul. There was nobody to whom she could confide what was deepest in her heart—nobody, at least, to whom she cared to confide this. People in that position very often keep diaries and so did she. It was not a good diary. It contains nothing that particularly illuminates for us the fading detail of her time, the social atmosphere, the current personalities. We do not catch the tone of a dead voice, the echo of long silent laughter on a summer's day, under the trees of the Park;

there are no gleams of high light ; she does not write well, and she does not attempt to do so.

Still, here the diary is, such fragments of it as need be quoted :

May 7.—Ride with Norton to Richmond. Talked about Hammersmith and the old days. A beautiful day. When I got back Rookwith was waiting. There was rather a scene and he said a lot of horrible things—about Norton not caring for me and only amusing himself until someone else took his fancy. Asked me to marry him again. The old business. I only wish I could bring myself to. Towards the end he calmed down and looked so sad I felt I would have given anything to make him happy. He let out that he knows about what happened at T.'s. He said Addington was out and he supposed Norton would get something to do. Norton came soon after he had gone and said he had met him near Lansdowne House and his manner was very queer. Norton very excited about Pitt's coming back, though not showing it of course. . . .

May 10.—Mr. Pitt is back, the papers say. I wonder what will happen to Norton. Saw Lady Stone (the new one, not the dowager) who is back in town. She said there were tales going around about me and Norton. Advised me to break it off and marry Rookwith. Said Norton had never been any good to any woman and never would be. I kept my temper. . . .

May 14.—Norton came. I said he was quite a stranger. He said he had had a lot of business in connection with Pitt's coming in again. I asked whether he had any news about himself and he said, No, nothing was decided.

May 15.—Walked with B. (her brother) in the Park. Saw Trevivian and his wife. T. bowed very coldly, his wife took hardly any notice. . . .

May 30.—Rookwith called. Said he thought he might be ordered abroad before very long. Talked about Norton. He told me there is still no appointment for him. I said I thought Lady Flanders was spreading tales about him and they had got to Mr. Pitt's ears. He looked thoughtful and said he was afraid I was right. . . .

June 23.—Rode to Willesden with Norton. He seemed quiet and depressed. Said, "My sins are coming home to roost, Joan." I cheered him up or tried to. It rained and we sheltered in an inn at Harlesden. Just as it was clearing up again, we heard two people come down the stairs and go out. They drove off in a closed carriage. I was looking out of the window and I am almost *sure* it was Rookwith and Lady Flanders. Norton didn't see them. . . .

July 2.—Norton came. Seems to be reconciled to being left out of the new Government. Very disappointed, of course. I said, I thought the life of a country gentleman, with a family to bring up, and friends in the county, was better than politics and London. He looked at me and said, "You used not to think like that." I said I meant it was better for him, not for me. "But you would like it now?" he said. I made a fool of myself and said, "I would, with you." He asked me to marry him then. Of course, I refused. It was like one of those silly duels where they fire in the air and then shake hands and say honour is satisfied. He said he would always love me like a brother. He said Rookwith seemed to go a lot to Flanders House now. I asked if it was to play tennis and he said No,

to see Lady Flanders, so he heard. He asked if Rookwith ever came here now. . . .

July 18.—B. said he heard in Hatchard's bookshop that Norton was going to be sent as Ambassador to Russia.

July 19.—Sent out for the *Gazette*. The news is true. He might have let me know.

July 20.—Norton called. Quite radiant in his subdued way. Only stayed for five minutes. Went upstairs and cried when he had gone. If only I could go abroad too. Anywhere out of this beastly town.

July 21.—Restless. Sent out for a horse and started for a ride with one of the grooms. Met Rookwith in Knightsbridge and he asked if he might come with me. Said yes, and sent back the groom. Talked about Norton. Stopped by a gate looking over some fields, near Hampstead, where you can see nearly all London. He said he wasn't going to begin making love to me again. I said, "I thought you had found consolation somewhere else." He put on his comical grin and said he supposed I meant Lady Flanders. I said yes. "Yes," he said, "I stopped her mouth very nicely." Then he became mysterious and wouldn't tell me any more.

July 22.—Invitation to dine at the Trevivians'. Wrote declining.

July 23.—Mrs. T. called. Wanted to know why I would not come to them. I told some story or other. She looked very embarrassed and said that she owed me an apology. Said a mutual friend had been spreading tales about something that was supposed to have happened last Christmas at their party. She had found out that the tales were spread out of spite

against Norton and everything was cleared up. She gushed over me, so I promised to go.

July 27.—End of season dinner at the Trevivians'. T., Mrs. T., Norton, Norton's sister Susan, Lord Hemingby, Mr. Boreland, Lord Morval. Everybody very nice to me. Drank success to Norton's mission. . . . He looked more beautiful than ever. I don't much like his sister. Found her looking at me with a funny expression once or twice. She was quite nice, though, and asked where I lived.

July 28.—Norton's sister, Lady Hemingby called. She is very amusing but indiscreet and loose in her talk. Promised to come again.

July 30.—Another visit from Susan Hemingby. She let fall some hints about Lady Flanders. Said Rookwith compromised her and then threatened to expose her to Flanders and society generally if she didn't do something to stop the scandal about N. and me that she had been spreading. Made her go to old Calne, whom she knows, and confess it was all a lie. Of course old Calne told Pitt. She is a funny woman. She pretends to be very candid but she is really like the other Fitzwarrens and always keeps something back. I couldn't tell what she really believed about the whole affair.

July 31.—Norton came in for a few minutes. He is travelling to Trentshire to-morrow morning to make some arrangements with his brother. . . .

There are no entries in the Diary for the month of August. Then, in September, it resumes:

Sept. 15.—A letter from Rookwith. He expects to go abroad in about a week's time. Sailing with sealed

papers for an unknown destination, so he says. That, God knows, is how I am sailing too.

Sept. 16.—Rookwith called. Was subdued and very nice. He is a dear good fellow. What a mess everything is!

Sept. 19.—Norton back in town. There are likely to be delays, and it may be three weeks before he goes. I should almost be glad to get it over quickly, and yet I cling to every minute of his company, like a fool.

Sept. 21.—Ride with Norton, to Richmond again. Passed Lady Sheen driving. She has a very sad and beautiful face. I did not know who it was until she had passed, and I asked N. N. seemed depressed.

Sept. 23.—N. called. Said that Rookwith's regiment had left London. I wonder if I shall ever see him again. . . .

Oct. 5.—N. definitely going on the 11th. A letter from some lawyers about Aunt Emma's will.

Oct. 6.—B. and I went to see the lawyers about Aunt E. She has left us all her money. Equally divided. I get about £40,000. I can hardly believe it. N. called. I told him about Aunt E. He said, "You're independent now," and smiled. I asked him what he was thinking of and he said—the big house in a savage land I had told him about so long ago when we were children, where I was going to live like a queen among the natives. I said I didn't know what I should do. He shrugged and said something about destiny.

Oct. 9.—Saw N. for a short while. He is worried, doubts his ability to carry out his mission, has the feeling that something unfortunate is before him. I told him this was all nonsense. He took my hand

and I thought for a minute he would have broken down. . . .

Oct. 11.—Thursday. Norton has just gone.

That, as it happens, is the last entry in the book. The Diary, there is reason to believe, was continued, but the other volumes were presumably burnt many years later when, a few days after the writer died, her great house on Mount Lebanon was destroyed by fire.

CHAPTER III

AMBASSADOR

§ I

THE week that preceded the October morning when he left London for Yarmouth, *en route* for St. Petersburg, was a chaos the like of which, Norton felt, no sort of ambition should ever tempt him into again. There were Hemingby's instructions and Pitt's instructions, the official orders and the secret orders; there were endless good-byes, infinite arrangements, interminable purchases to make; the old routine, essentially so bland and uneventful, had, for the time being at least, to be wound up. As he went about the fashionable part of London, along each well-known street, he was acutely conscious of the depth of his love for the place—its tall grey house-fronts, its familiar squares, its fanlighted doorways through which he had so often passed to some pleasant dinner with friendly people, people he knew and belonged to. Now he was going to a strange city, among strangers. He would be a personage there, no doubt. The English Ambassador, anywhere in the wide world, is necessarily a personage. But he would be lonely. There would be problems. . . .

Lady Stone was at Eastbourne. The quiet little sea-bathing place would give her, she had thought, the rest and change she needed. Norton dashed down to say good-bye and stayed for a few hours only. She seemed depressed, he thought, and at first not very communicative. During the afternoon, they walked a little way

along the beach together and he noticed that she leant rather heavily upon his arm.

"I knew you would not be forgotten," she told him, after a long silence.

He asked her, only half seriously, how she knew.

"Well, Norton——" She considered, her eyes fixed upon a passing sail. "Of course, I never *asked* Mr. Pitt for anything, but it was always an understood thing that—— You see, he owed it to the family. Your father——"

She tailed off into some anecdotage of the old days at Stone, when Mr. Pitt had been used to come and stay under her roof. "When you were still at school," she added. "So long ago as that."

Her thoughts wandered for a while among pictures of the little schoolboy Norton, coming home for holidays, going away again as each new term began, growing, developing a constant source of pride and anxiety to herself and to his father.

The big man beside her said:

"Do you think I shall manage it, mother?"

She emerged from her reverie. "Manage what, my boy?"

"What I'm going to Russia for. The negotiation of the Treaty. Getting the best possible terms, seeing that we aren't cheated. All that sort of thing."

"Why shouldn't you manage it?"

"I don't know." He cut at a pebble with his cane. "I'm not a Trevivian type. I can't see through things and people quickly. And they'll probably throw dust in my eyes."

She pursed her lips and looked past him out to sea again. The little sail was nearly out of sight now.

"Honesty of purpose, my boy, is your best equip-

ment. There are plenty of diplomats, I suppose, who know all the tricks of the game. Mr. Pitt could have picked a score of them. But he wanted to impress Russia with our sincerity. He wanted to send somebody who would make them believe that he would stand by them to the end so long as they stood by us."

He digested this in silence. Was it sound? There seemed to be something to be said for it. After all, he had almost no experience, and Pitt was too acute a man to throw away the Russian alliance for the sake of pleasing the Fitzwarren family.

"I shall hate leaving London," he said.

Her tongue clicked with vexation. "What nonsense!"

He laughed affectionately at her.

"It's true," he bantered. "That's why I'm afraid I sha'n't do well over there. I shall be tempted to scamp my treaty so as to get the mission over and come back to London."

She took his words literally. Stopping in her slow walk, she said:

"Promise me you'll *never* do anything so disgraceful, Norton!"

He perceived that he had upset her and withdrew.

"Of course, mother. I was only joking."

But she hardly seemed reassured. With the customary maternal authority in her voice,

"I'm afraid I don't care for jokes like that," she said.

They walked on again. Her weathered, homely features were full of sadness as at last they left the sea-shore and turned towards the house where she was staying. At the door she paused.

"You will have to think of me sometimes," she said, "when you are—over there." She indicated with a vague gesture the long horizon of the Channel. "I shall be sitting up at that window, perhaps, and my thoughts will be all of you, Norton——"

She broke off, and fumbled in her purse for the door-key. They passed together into the dark hall, hung with prints of obsolete ships-of-war and deceased admirals. . . .

He left that night. Next day, a parcel of books came to Great Stanhope Street from Eastbourne. There was a letter enclosed.

"My dearest Norton," Lady Stone wrote, "After you left yesterday I thought you might care to have these little volumes. They will take up hardly any room in your baggage. I think you may like the Exposition, particularly the 5th, 6th and 7th Chapters of St. Matthew. . . ." He glanced at the dark-bound books on the table: a Prayer-Book, a *Short Method with the Deists* and an *Exposition of the New Testament*. . . . "If we should never meet again in this world, dearest Norton," the letter continued, "please read them for my sake. No time for more now. . . ."

He stuffed the letter in his pocket. Melancholy, simple and overwhelming, flooded his heart. That solitary figure in an upper window of the seaside house, that dear face worn in the unselfish services of life. . . . If we should never meet again. . . .

Damn it all, he must pull himself together!

Brusquely he crossed the room and rang the bell.

"Where's Sacks?" he demanded of the domestic.

Sacks, apparently, was upstairs packing.

"Send him here, please."

In a few minutes Sacks appeared, a somewhat

older, greyer Sacks than the one who had voyaged to Naples in '94.

"Have you got room for these books?" Norton asked him.

Sacks picked them up, eyed them with faint hostility, and appeared to be surreptitiously weighing them.

"We haven't got too much room," he announced at length.

"You must make room."

Sacks glanced curiously at his master. It was distinctly unlike the master to make such a point of taking the Book of Common Prayer on a journey.

"I'll have to get out the small wooden box," he conceded. "That'll hold the odds and ends."

Norton indicated that this would be satisfactory, so far as he was concerned, and Sacks departed. . . .

The small wooden box, depository of Sacks' "odds and ends", met mysterious calamity on the occasion of Norton's disembarking at Riga. Sacks saw it off the ship and himself accompanied the vehicle that took the luggage to the hotel, lest any mistake should be made. When, however, he finally came to take account of everything, the small wooden box was missing. He made a fuss, as his responsibility demanded, threatening every Slav who crossed his path with the majestic vengeance of the British Crown, thus wantonly outraged. . . . It was all of no avail. The small wooden box was never found. Holy Russia had taken forever unto her vast impenetrable bosom Lady Stone's Prayer Book, the *Exposition*, and the *Short Method with the Deists*.

§ II

Among other farewell visits, he called for an hour on the day before his departure, at Cavendish Square.

There was, however, a reason for this over and above his old affection for Lady Sheen. He was taking two attachés to St. Petersburg for experience, and one of them was Willy Barron, Lady Sheen's youngest son, just down from Cambridge. It was therefore necessary to give the mother certain last assurances as to her son's welfare, Willy never having previously left the shores of his native land.

They had a pleasant, friendly interview in the music-room. (He still went straight there, though so much was changed.)

"You will look after the boy, won't you?" she pressed him.

Norton promised to keep an eye on his attaché.

She pondered, a little unhappily. Knowing their father so well, she was inclined to be nervous about her sons. And Willy seemed a much weaker vessel than his brothers had been. Norton, too, was more likely to be a bad example than a good one to a boy like that—though it hurt her to think it.

"I must leave him to you," she said at length.

He smiled. "Now will you do something for me?"

"What is that?"

"Write to me."

She regarded him uncertainly. "Write——?"

"About London and what is going on here, all about the people I know—gossip and politics. You know what I like to hear."

She nodded. "But—why me?"

"Because you write so well." He paused and glanced towards the window. "You're still the cleverest woman I ever knew—after all. The cleverest woman in London."

Laughing, to hide the pain at her heart,

"That's so nice of you to say that," she said.

"Then you will write?"

"I'll try."

They said good-bye, gravely, kindly, who in the past had had so many passionate partings. On the following day, Willy went too. And on the day after that, a Friday, Henrietta Sheen sat down to write the first page of those long and vivid journal-letters which are now the glory of the Fitzwarren Papers. . . .

People in London—uncharitable people—remarked that Lady Sheen had got Willy sent to St. Petersburg with the idea of keeping her old lover under surveillance. It is the kind of thing people will say, the kind of thing that is bound to be false when you begin to probe the facts. Still, it was said. She had been afraid, so the tale went, that Norton would marry Joan Stathern. That seemed to have been scotched, but nothing so near marriage must occur again where he was concerned. Hence, in the town's view, the presence of the Honourable William Barron on the vessel that was even now passing Elsinore, bearing the English Ambassador to his destiny.

Young Willy, it must be admitted, was unaware of the rôle for which gossip had cast him. At the time, moreover, he was too sick to think about "the Lord" very much. The attachés, between themselves, invariably referred to Norton as "the Lord". There seemed to be no special reason for this. Willy lay in his bunk one whole morning pondering the matter. Lords, in their world, were plentiful. Every other uncle and a good many cousins were Lords of something. It must be, then, that Norton *looked* like a Lord. The magnificent physique, the air of royal calm, the way he wore his clothes.

"Grand seigneur," murmured Willy to himself.

He considered his own rather fair-haired weedy person. He would probably fill out, of course. Still, one could never hope to be in the same class as the Lord. No wonder there were all sorts of tales about him. All sorts of tales. . . . Willy's eyes closed. His brow puckered in thought. Something Kathy had said, long ago, about Mother and—who else? He tried to recall the detail of the conversation, but it eluded him. He was almost sure, though, that Kathy had said something in one of her bad moods about the Lord and Mother. Very curious and interesting. . . .

The door opened.

"Hello, Willy," said the Lord, "not up yet?"

Willy raised himself painfully on one elbow. "I'm afraid I'm still a sick man, sir," he announced.

The Lord grunted. "You're a damned lazy one," he said.

Willy, deeply affronted, took the cut meekly. "I was just going to get up," he conceded.

"Well, come up on deck and take a walk."

"Very well, sir."

When the Lord had departed, Willy sank back again upon the pillow and enjoyed a final ten minutes of his bed, then, dressing without interest, made his way up on deck. The ship was going nicely before a steady wind. There was a great deal of grey sea on every hand. The Lord was walking up and down with the other attaché.

The ship slithered abruptly and Willy's stomach responded to the movement with distressing precision. He decided to go down again and read a novel by the cabin fire. The novel, however, did not grip. His

mind wandered back to the Lord. Suppose the Lord gave away some secret papers to a French spy, a *female* French spy, some lovely Russian woman in the pay of Napoleon. . . . No, he wouldn't exactly give them away, of course. But he might allow himself to be tricked. He might not see through the creature's wiles. But *he*, William Barron, would see through everything. He would keep watch. And then at the right moment he would save the situation and earn the undying gratitude of the Lord.

The details of the matter were not too clear. That was a pity, but inevitable.

He closed his eyes, thought hazily for a while about Cambridge scenes and faces, now so dim and unreal, and wondered how much longer the damned ship would take getting to port.

From somewhere in the grey void outside there percolated faintly the shrill and distasteful scream of a seabird.

Willy yawned.

§ III

Russia: a long empty road skirting the edge of the sea, a sandy primitive affair, hardly more than a track, along which the carriage ground and bumped its way eastward; sinister forests, great belts of firs like rough carpets over the land; a dismal succession of bad inns, worse than the lowest English pothouse.

A broad, heart-breaking country, pastoral in a crude fashion, disturbing, inexplicable. The travellers on the road, the people at the inns—a motley set of Russians, Polish Jews, fair-haired Germans—were unbelievable and, quite definitely, unwholesome. As for the peasants, glancing up with furtive hostile eyes as the carriage passed—Norton could not make up his

mind whether they were frightened or dangerous. They got out of the way quickly, that was the main point.

He was conscious of a vast dislike of this strange country. He had, of course, been there before, on the Grand Tour. But then he had been a boy and he had taken things for granted.

It went on and on. They read, dozed, chatted, and periodically got out and walked to stretch their legs. Every morning Willy had to be dragged out of bed, vile as the beds invariably were. Any bed was better than getting up, in Willy's sight.

Miles of marshy desolate plain, uncultivated, without beauty or dignity. Then, at length, Lake Peipus in the dawn, a dreary sandy-shored inland sea, with a few fishermen's huts clustered at the edge. A white eagle dropped down in leisurely fashion to watch them pass.

Finally, thankfully, they reached the Petersburg Gate.

A new crop of difficulties, however, instantly sprang to attention. There were *tracasseries* with the returning Ambassador, whose recall had not been to his liking; there was the trouble of selecting a suitable house from among all the large, cold, costly and uncomfortable palaces offered; there were presentations, audiences, introductions; above all, there was the novel burden of "business".

Norton had never accustomed himself to "business". That sort of thing, in his world, one usually left to one's "man of business", unless one happened to be good at making calculations and arrangements and all the various component parts of "business". Now, at last, he had to plan for himself and, more than that,

for his Government and his country. Suppose, for example, an important interview took place between himself and the Czar's Minister. The interview itself was not so bad. He knew how to bear himself in an affair of that kind, how to be friendly and courteous and as discreet as an oyster. But when the talk was over and the Minister had been bowed out, you had to sit down and write a damned despatch about it to Hemingby. And that was the very devil. Night after night, till two in the morning, he was at his desk, trying over "I suggested to him", "I reminded him", "he impressed upon me", "I gathered" and so on. Getting the exact tone of the conversation, the infinite subtle shades of meaning, so that they would not misunderstand at London, was a more agonising business than he would ever have thought possible.

Then, after all the labour, the first lot of despatches was stolen from his messenger in the Schwerin Forest.

Socially, life was not much better. For one thing, he had to go, by virtue of his position, to all the great official affairs, where one met the Empress Regnante, young, beautiful and sad; the Empress Mother, large, cheerful and curvilinear, full of good works and pious activities; and the Czar, a youthful and benevolent despot. All estimable in their way, but dull and, naturally, unapproachable.

Apart from these there were the numerous small parties, pleasant in a mild fashion, for which the capital was celebrated. Even here, however, the brilliance and finish of London were lacking. A distinguished man, a very pretty woman, were exceptional occurrences; a tendency to slovenliness, soilure, creases, was everywhere apparent; he was sometimes

aware of dark-rimmed finger-nails and the scent of stale powder. Generally, at dinners, he was cast for the place of honour, next to the old lady of the house, and he had to try and remember the present condition of a large number of septuagenarian English people whom his hostess had met long ago on some visit to London in '70 or '80.

He was happiest in his own house. Of course, he had the boredom of receptions, of bowing three times to an ambassador and once to a *chargé d'affaires*, of walking to the staircase with the former and only so far as the ante-room with the latter: but one could always enjoy a game of billiards or chess when the despatches were done, and the doors closed on St. Petersburg society.

Sometimes he went out riding with Willy, this being one of the few forms of exercise Willy indulged in. St. Petersburg, from the back of a horse, was by no means a bad place—vast, clean, grand, a kaleidoscope of colour and light at this season of the year. One derived an impression of infinite beards, infinite fur caps and cloaks, a wide variety of dress, endless beautiful horses drawing rather dowdy carriages at a great rate over the ground, a general confused air of the East and of a certain qualified barbarism.

One morning, as he rode out with Willy through one of the public squares, a carriage dashed past, containing a solitary lady, wrapped in furs, with a calm Greek face, lovely as a dream.

Norton involuntarily drew in his breath.

"By Jove, Willy! Did you see that?"

Willy nodded. "Yes, sir."

"I wonder who the devil it is."

"Surely, you know, sir."

Norton looked at him. What was the boy getting at?

"I don't know her from Eve," he said.

"That's the Narychkin," said Willy, with a pleased proprietary air.

The Narychkin! Madame Narychkin, the mistress of the Czar!

Norton gazed after the distant carriage.

"She must be the loveliest woman in Russia," he said. Then: "How did you come to know her?"

Willy blushed. He didn't, it appeared, *know* her exactly. But he had been at a party one evening when Norton had stayed at home with a headache, and the Narychkin had come in for a few minutes.

"They discussed afterwards," he added, "whether she or Princess Barbarov was the better-looking."

"Princess who?"

"Barbarov."

Norton shook his head. "I don't think I ever met her. I don't remember the name."

No, Willy hadn't met her, either. But she had, it seemed, quite a reputation in the capital. There was a tale that she had always refused her husband, Prince Barbarov, conjugal rights—"whatever they may be," Willy added disingenuously. "Anyhow, they don't live together."

"I don't care for that Parisian-Russian type," Norton remarked.

But this, apparently, was not the position at all. "She isn't that sort, they say," Willy hastened to explain. "There's no other man in the picture at all."

Norton grunted. "She sounds a queer woman."

"Very beautiful, I should think," Willy opined.

They rode on.

§ IV

One evening during November the Swedish Ambassador gave a ball. The official hospitalities of the *corps diplomatique* are not in the general way the most amusing functions in the world. Norton, nevertheless, felt himself obliged to go, as the Imperial Minister, Czartoryski, was expected to be present, and it was dangerous to lose a possible chance of pushing on the treaty negotiations. Besides, you were always liable to give rise to rumours if you stayed away from an affair of this sort. Though, indeed, you were liable to give rise to rumours, whatever you did. An ambassador, it seemed, couldn't so much as sneeze without setting a hundred tongues wagging.

So far, no letters had come from England. The sense of isolation, a panicky feeling as of a child left behind and forgotten, sometimes invaded him. At such moments, the mental picture of St. James's Street, with the old clock-tower at the foot of the slope, or of Joan Stathern's cosy front sitting-room in Hill Street, could present themselves to him with a poignancy that was like a physical pain. Late at night, perhaps, after a tussle about figures with the Russians, when he was jaded and out of spirits, these pictures would more particularly come to him. And then, insidiously, the impulse would follow, to leave it all, to open the door, get horses to the coast, and slip back quietly to his mother and Great Stanhope Street. . . .

He was sometimes half afraid that, in a mad moment, he might really do it.

So, in spite of the boredom that they involved, he generally accepted invitations to go out, rather than

give way to the temptation of a pleasantly sentimental but demoralising brood by his own fireside.

This particular November evening, then, saw him at the Swedish Ambassador's.

The night was fine, save for a few intermittent flakes of snow that wavered in the keen clear air. Overhead was the rich luminous dark blue of the Petersburg sky. The horses slipped on the stones. Soon, very soon now, it would be winter.

At the Swedish Ambassador's it was, plainly, to be a grand function. The gateway of the Embassy was choked with carriages disgorging furry animals that on closer inspection proved to be the élite of the Russian aristocracy. There was much shouting, much rearing of horses. He had to wait a quarter of an hour to get through.

Surrendering his own quota of fur, he went in to pay his respects to his host. He was conscious that people stepped aside as he advanced across the entrance hall, that there were whispers behind him. A woman's voice sighed: "Magnifique!"

It wasn't unpleasant. But, after all, it had happened before. . . .

Willy, some paces in the rear, lived in the rays of glory sent forth by the Lord. If the Lord was the Ambassador then he, Willy Barron, was the Ambassador's attaché, and let no snub-nosed Slav forget it. He glanced around at the serried ranks of high cheekbones and hoped his bearing was as lofty, his gaze as weary and splendid as the Lord's.

After the Lord had presented him to the little Swedish man, they got separated. Not that Willy particularly minded this. He rather liked talking to people the Lord didn't know, because it provided him with

conversational tit-bits for the next day. He was well aware that the Lord, for all his lofty mien, dearly loved gossip, if it were well served up. Soon after midnight Willy found himself discussing fox-hunting with a wizened gentleman in a blue and gold uniform, diamond stars and pearl epaulettes—"rather like a sunset at sea," he told the Lord afterwards. He was trying to keep his end up about the fox-hunting, which was difficult because in England he had always got out of this form of sport whenever possible on account of the ridiculous hours they chose for it. Pelting along after a bad smell at half past ten on a winter morning was, in his view, a poor sort of entertainment. So that his replies to the wizened gentleman's enquiries regarding English procedure were inclined to be vague. Finally, when he felt that he was making a thoroughly unfortunate impression, Fate relieved him. Something attracted the attention of the wizened man. He frowned, and some words in French indicative of astonishment escaped him.

Willy followed the direction of his eyes and saw, walking up the room towards them, the tall figure of the Lord, apparently in confidential conversation with a beautiful woman—a striking black-and-white creature, with a pale Russian face. The jewels of a tiara gleamed in the coiled black masses of her hair. Her black gown, cut low at the bosom, only half concealed the whiteness of her breasts.

The wizened man turned to Willy with an indeterminate smile.

"You know who that is, Monsieur?"

Willy said he knew, of course, Lord Norton Fitzwarren.

"No! No! The lady, I mean!"

"I have not that honour."

"Well—that is Princess Barbarov."

Willy looked. The woman had paused and seemed to be showing the Lord something of interest in one of the pictures on the wall.

"The *famous* Princess Barbarov?" he verified.

"Famous, indeed. She is twenty-two, five years married, and a virgin."

Willy made suitable noises expressive of his surprise at this phenomenon. His eyes were still on the white figure in its dead black gown, over there with the Lord. He had never, in England, seen anything so remarkable.

"She is more beautiful than the Narychkin, I should say," he observed, in a proper appraising tone.

The wizened man exhibited signs of alarm. "S'sh, my friend." He glanced cautiously around. "You must not say things like that in Petersburg," he added. "But, between ourselves——"

He let the extent of his agreement go at that.

The dancing was beginning. Willy wondered whether the Lord would dance. He hoped not. The Lord walked across a room like a sovereign prince, but he danced like an alderman. The Princess would never get over it. However, they were not going to dance together, apparently. Willy and the wizened man watched them moving off again down the room. They disappeared at length round some palms.

The wizened man grunted. "Sitting out," he said, *sotto voce*; and to Willy, in an insinuating tone: "Your Ambassador, Monsieur, must be a man of compelling personality."

Willy agreed that this was so.

"With women?"

"They say," replied Willy, largely, "that half London shut its doors when he came here."

The wizened man nodded and pursed his lips. "Princess Barbarov," he stated, with emphasis, "goes very rarely into society—not, God knows, because she is not wanted, but because she does not want to go. She is a strange woman. . . . Still you must admit it is hard to see her carried off by a good-looking foreigner under one's very nose."

This was a troublesome speech to reply to. Willy wanted to explain that Englishmen were not foreigners. But the thing presented difficulties. While he considered his answer, the wizened man resumed:

"But your Lord Norton will sigh in vain."

"He has never done so yet," Willy cut back.

The wizened man looked rather fierce for a moment then, with a mysterious smile, he repeated slowly:

"He will sigh in vain."

The diamond stars on his blue-and-gold uniform winked sardonically.

§ v

When, about midnight, Norton, standing by the door, heard his name called in a woman's voice, he was absorbed in a reverie. People came up to him, exchanged a few words of small-talk, and departed again, hardly disturbing the current of his reflections. The spectacle of this queer semi-Asiatic society gave rise to all sorts of considerations. It wasn't healthy, this feudal condition of things in a world which had left feudalism behind. All these people were Russian born and bred, their race was evident in their every feature. Yet they habitually conversed in French, many of them had a French habit of thought, not a few

were quite unable to speak the Russian tongue. It was always a bad thing when an aristocracy cut itself off by barriers like that from the life of the people. He was no Whig—Lord forbid. Stuff about the people's will nauseated him and always would. But an aristocracy had to lead its people, not merely live on it. He hadn't been able to help seeing, even in so short a time, the prevalent absenteeism, with its inevitable implication of neglected estates and resentful peasantries. These men and women had had the tragedy of France played out before them like a deliberate warning, and they had learnt nothing from it. Literally, nothing.

It was at this point that the woman's voice, languid, inclined to a contralto quality, said:

"Lord Norton."

He looked round. A lady, seated by a palm near the door, was smiling at him—an entire stranger, so far as he could tell, though it was difficult to say this for certain, the introductions of the past few weeks had been so many. A second glance, however, assured him that he had not met this lady before. He would quite definitely have remembered a face like that.

"You have forgotten me, Lord Norton," she added, in French.

"I am desolated, madame. Such is the case."

She smiled a lazy smile. "It is not your fault. I was only a little girl when you saw me last. Do you not remember, now, the Princess Chirsky, whom you used to visit sometimes in—1793, was it not?"

Light dawned slowly upon him. "You are not—Natalya?"

"I am Natalya."

Looking at her now, he could recognize the strange little girl again. There were the same full red lips in

a pale face, only very slightly touched now with rouge—the same intent, withdrawn expression of the eyes.

"And you remembered me?" he said.

"I knew, of course, that you were in Petersburg."

"But—you recognized me?"

"I suppose I was half looking out for you."

He was not sure of the purport of this remark.

"How is your mother?" he asked, conventionally.

"My mother is dead."

"I'm sorry. . . . She was very kind to me."

"She was kind to most people. Not always, perhaps, to me."

He remembered that, long ago, the two had not seemed entirely in sympathy.

"I am surprised that I have not met you before in Petersburg," he said.

She told him that society bored her. In fact she had only just come back to Petersburg after a long stay in the country.

"I had to come about my divorce," she added, frankly.

He looked sympathetic, but she only shrugged. "When a girl is married at seventeen against her will——"

She finished with an ambiguous gesture of the hand.

"It turns out well quite often," he reminded her.

"But not in my case. . . . And you, Monsieur," she added, "you are happily married, no doubt?"

"No, I am not married."

"Nor likely to be?"

"No."

She laughed. "We will find you some beautiful Russian before you return."

"I have only seen two so far."

"Indeed! Madame Narychkin, I presume and——"

He bowed. "Yourself, Madame."

The lazy smile revealed her strong teeth. "You flirt very prettily, Lord Norton."

"Thank you, Madame. I have had much practice."

She rose. Her poise, as she stood there by the palm, seemed to him superb.

"Do you love Italy as much as ever?" he asked her.

"More than ever, because I never see it now."

"Why don't you go?"

"Oh, I don't know." She made vague references to the distance, the French, the unsettled condition of Europe.

"You mean you won't make the effort," he said.

They began to walk up the room. With a sidelong glance at him,

"Are you scolding me, Lord Norton?" she demanded.

"Perhaps."

She nodded. "Perhaps I need more scolding than people have ever given me."

She was, he thought, as disagreeably egotistic as ever. But, of course, what was objectionable in a sallow little girl could be charming in a beautiful woman.

They paused before one of the landscapes on the wall, a picture of the temples at Pæstum.

"You know them?" she asked.

"Yes. . . . I had a great experience there, long ago."

"I see. Some woman, I suppose."

"Yes. A very wonderful woman."

They gazed together at the painting. "And what happened?" she said.

"Oh, she grew older. We both grew older. Things came between us—all sorts of things." He smiled a trifle wistfully. "You know the way people drift apart."

"She was married?"

"Oh, of course."

With a faint sigh, a clouding of the dark eyes,

"I never had an emotional experience like that."

He was incredulous. "Nothing at all?"

"Nothing. I have merely existed all these years."

The music was beginning. "You dance?" she said.

"Very badly."

"I, too. I could never trouble to learn. We will talk, then."

They drifted back down the room again and found an untenanted alcove where they could talk undisturbed.

Petersburg society, that night, had something to talk about too. The dazzling Princess Barbarov and the magnificent English Ambassador had spent the whole of the Swedish Ball in one another's company. He had always conquered, the tales went, wherever he chose to conquer. Up to now, that was. And now, Petersburg had challenged him with the Barbarova. What would happen? Would the fortress go down before the English guns? Or would the tradition be maintained? Anyhow, it was a piquant situation, considerably more amusing to light-minded people than, for example, the imminent prospect of a devastating French war.

Norton, it must be admitted, was far from unconscious of the stir his evening's activities would make. He knew that it was indiscreet to devote himself in this way. But he had found a woman who, after all his boredom, seemed likely to take the place of Henrietta

Sheen and Joan Stathern during the duration of his stay in Russia, a beautiful, intelligent woman with whom it was possible to establish that sort of connection his nature demanded. Not, he made it clear to himself a connection of passion. Or at any rate, not primarily so. Simply an affair of company, of friendliness, of a relationship that should keep in check the lonely impulses of the past weeks.

And, quite definitely, he was prepared to risk much to achieve such a relationship as that.

It was only as he was taking her to her carriage that he remembered he did not know her name.

"Whose carriage must I ask for?" he said.

She smiled. "You really don't know?"

"I only know you were Princess Natalya Chirsky."

"Say—Princess Barbarov's," she told him.

She saw his expression change. It said, more plainly than words: "So *you* are the notorious Barbarova!"

When he came back with the carriage, his naïve astonishment, the trace of confusion that had oddly pleased and flattered her, were gone from his face.

"I may come and see you?" he asked.

"If you like."

"Where do you live?"

She told him the address—a small house near the Taurid Gardens.

"To-morrow, after the play?"

Again she said: "If you like."

The horses pulled, the carriage trundled out over the stones of the courtyard. He caught a last glimpse of her face, queerly familiar and significant to him, as she disappeared.

Thoughtfully, without more than a superficial glance around, he made his way back. He did not, he felt,

want to stay any longer. The desire to go home and ponder matters by his own fireside became dominant in his mind. He sought for Willy, but Willy had left some time ago. A bad habit of the boy's, playing truant directly he happened to feel bored. Nevertheless, making the excuse of urgent business to his host, Norton followed the example of his attaché. . . .

At the English Embassy, Willy, in slippered feet, was reading a letter by the fire. He looked up as the Lord came in. The Lord, in his fur coat and cap, touched with snow, looked grave and more than usually splendid.

"Why did you run away early?" he demanded.

Willy said he had got bored—a perfectly truthful explanation.

"That's no excuse," said the Lord. "You'll offend people doing that."

Willy sniffed. This was really coming it rather strong. "*I* didn't have Princess Barbarov to myself all the evening," he retorted.

The Lord removed his cap and coat with leisurely deliberation, and advanced towards the fire.

"Go to bed," he said shortly.

"All right. I was just going."

"Any letters?"

"Yes, letters from England."

"For me?"

Willy rose. "No, none for you, sir."

It pained him to have to gloat over the Lord's letterlessness, but he felt he owed it to himself to enjoy the gloat while it lasted, in view of the Lord's recent unwarrantably dictatorial manner to him. However, he decided to be magnanimous.

"Yours may come to-morrow," he suggested benevolently.

Surprisingly, the Lord yawned. It was a large yawn, an affair of satiety, of contentment. It seemed to indicate an entire indifference to any letters that could possibly come for him from England.

"Perhaps so," the Lord agreed. And then: "Be off to bed. I want to be quiet."

Willy, not without dignity, went. . . .

§ VI

Next day letters from England did in fact come for Norton, in the Foreign Office bag. There was one from his mother, chiefly about his health, his clothes, God, the wickedness of Charles Fox and the pernicious effects of continental stoves. And a rather bulky package contained a long journal-letter from Lady Sheen. He opened it. Only yesterday, this would have given him exquisite pleasure. For weeks and weeks, he had been looking forward to receiving it, to the contact with England, the gossip and the news. But now the edge was off his keenness. He had a new orientation. . . . To-night, after the play, he was to go to Princess Barbarov's.

Lady Sheen wrote:

"I cannot imagine you very clearly as an ambassador. Of course you will carry off the decorative part very nicely. But ambassadors have to do much that is more than a little dirty. Denying what one knows, appearing to know what one does not, paying spies, pensioning traitors, encouraging informers, opening letters—all that sort of thing may be necessary but it cannot be otherwise than detestable. I am afraid I should be a poor hand at it. You remember that in the old days

you were constantly chiding me for blabbing out at table some political secret or other you had told me in confidence. . . .

"My sister's card debts are coming home to roost.

"Poor thing, she is ill with worrying about them. Some kind of confession has been made to the Duke, and he has promised to settle everything, though he will have to raise mortgages to do it. Unhappily, however, he has been led to understand that they are no more than £6,000 or £7,000, while the truth is that they cannot be less than £40,000. I do hope you are not playing, dear N. I know that you have always been fortunate up to now, but a person in your position simply *must* not risk anything.

"The King goes from bad to worse. In general, he is sane enough. But some of his actions are so totally at variance with his character that it can only mean a recurrence of his madness. The latest tale is that he is persecuting old Lady Pembury with his attentions. He is sixty-eight, she seventy-two. Both have led blameless lives. It seems incredible that such unblemished scutcheons should be so seriously jeopardised. Nevertheless, I tremble for her virtue. . . .

"Your mother wrote asking me to go and see her last week. She is back in Great Stanhope Street. She appointed half-past-eleven in the morning as a reasonable hour for a call. Pretty Spartan, you will agree, but I managed to struggle across. We talked a good deal about you, and I gained much information regarding your habits and customs as a little boy of five. She was troubled by something she had heard about Miss Stathern.

"By the way, Miss Stathern is said to be going

abroad. Apparently she had some money left to her recently and she intends to travel with it. I was talking recently to your sister Susan, who knows her, and says she is leaving England for good. She apparently has some idea of settling in the Levant-Damascus or somewhere. It all sounds very absurd and romantic but of course it is her own business. From all I hear, she seems to be a strange girl altogether, and a person of strong passions into the bargain. You know her much better than I do, however.

"Morval has definitely come over to us. The Whigs cannot but welcome such an accession to their ranks. He must be sincere, since we have nothing whatever to offer him. I suppose this comes of marrying into the Caversham family. So if and when you decide to marry Anne, we may hope for a second convert. . . .

"I see quite a good deal of your friend Trevivian nowadays. You will be surprised at this, but the truth is we get on very well together. I gather from him that the ship of State is in serious difficulties—disturbances and quarrels among the crew, and the Captain apparently unable to put matters right. I can't help thinking, dear N., that Mr. Pitt is not the man he was. He seems to have lost his grip of things. At present, for instance, he is letting the old Addington faction—Boreland & Co.—gain ground tremendously in the Government, to the detriment of his own supporters. Trevivian himself expects to be jockeyed out altogether if things go on in this way. He is puzzled and hurt but can do nothing. He says that all the lower offices are in confusion and no business is being done at all. It is certain that the air is full of rumours, accusations, recriminations, denials, bad feeling and bad faith. You are well out of it all.

"I have heard nothing of your friend Rookwith. He is certainly abroad, but nobody can tell me where.

"I thought your mother was looking far from well. Are you sure your sisters do not neglect her? I don't like to think of her all alone at Bognor Rocks and those other desolate seaside places she goes to.

"Doesn't it seem unbelievable to you, N., that Naples was ten years ago? The years simply fly by, *les jours après les jours, et enfin la vie*. So short a life it seems, at my age, so troublesome, and so much fuller of sadness for nearly everybody than it really need be. Do not smile and say 'Bosh!' to this. You know that it is true—or you will know, some day. . . ."

§ VII

He folded the letter and put it away. The pictures it evoked, and the anticipation of the coming evening, fought for a while in his mind. Then, gradually, the pictures faded out, and only the anticipation remained.

He duly presented himself, on leaving the theatre, at the door of the small house near the Taurid Gardens.

She was upstairs, lying on a reclining-chair in a long room with triple windows at each end. A profusion of *objets d'art*, chiefly Italian, occupied every surface and corner. Beside the Princess, a French *demoiselle de compagnie* sat reading aloud. She rose as Norton entered and seemed to be awaiting instructions.

"You may go to bed, Thérèse," the Princess said. "I shall not want you again to-night."

The *demoiselle* retired.

Norton bent over the proffered hand. "The play was interminable."

She smiled. "Why did you go?"

"I had arranged to go."

"But what a reason!"

He felt that she was deliberately disparaging the sound Fitzwarren quality of purpose in him. A frown settled on his forehead.

"When you have arranged to do something," he said, "don't you go on with it?"

"Of course not—not always. Only when it suits me."

"A scandalous admission, Princess."

She pretended to be upset. "If you are going to scold me again, you had better go away."

"I'm sorry. I still look upon you as a little girl, you see."

She regarded him with a suspicion of mockery, through half-closed eyes.

"That will do. I accept your apology."

He glanced round at the medley of bric-à-brac.

"Don't these things get broken?" he said.

"Sometimes. But there is nothing that cannot be replaced."

He mused. "In life too, you mean?"

"In life too, if you like."

"An easy philosophy."

"A lazy one, you might have said. But really I could not bear to possess anything so precious to me that I was afraid of losing it."

He shook his head. "You will fall in love one day, Princess. And then all your philosophy will be blown sky-high."

Imperturbably—"That is what Count Mourakin tells me."

Her tone piqued his curiosity.

"Who is Count Mourakin?"

"Do you mean to say you haven't heard of him?"

"Never."

She considered. "He is a Liberal writer—and an authority on Greek and Roman antiques," she said. "I have known him for years. Formerly he used often to come here. But I think he has abandoned me now. . . . It was he who got me most of this"—she indicated the infinite objects of virtu—"most of this rubbish."

He challenged the epithet. "You don't really think it is rubbish."

"Sometimes I do."

"But you are fond of—all that sort of thing."

"Yes—sometimes."

He rose. "You can be very exasperating, Natalya."

She laughed at him. "Natalya?" she queried, with affected surprise.

"I beg your pardon, Princess Barbarov."

She shrugged. "What does it matter? Why not simply Natasha?"

"You are playing with me, Princess."

"Why should I do that?"

"I don't know. To show your power, perhaps."

"To show my power? It is plain that you have been listening to silly tales about me, Lord Norton."

Abruptly the quality of her voice underwent a change. She motioned him to the high-backed chair beside her, where the demoiselle had lately been sitting.

"I was talking foolishly," she said, "and so were you—a little. . . . Now, tell me about England. I used to meet such nice English people in Italy——"

She mentioned the names of various people he knew. He told her what they were doing now, and she recounted incidents that had happened in Italy.

Unerringly, she kept the conversation on the level he liked—the level of gossip and comment, of delicate scandal, well removed from those personal and egoistic subjects which he shied at.

The hours slipped by. . . .

At length he rose. He really must be going.

She gave him her hands. "You are always welcome here, Lord Norton."

"That is very kind of you, Princess."

She pouted. "Not Natasha?"

"Natasha then."

He bent over the reclining-chair. It is sometimes a highly dangerous proceeding to kiss the hand of a lovely woman in a Voltaire reclining-chair at half-past one in the morning. At that hour, for example, there is so little distance between the hand and the lips. . . .

At home, Willy was still up. The house was silent and forbidding.

"I was just going to bed," Willy remarked. His eyes were already heavy with sleep.

"What did you stay up for?"

Willy rose stiffly. "Somebody came with a message from Czartoryski. He wanted you to go across as soon as you came in."

Norton frowned. What could the all-powerful imperial Minister want so urgently?

"When was that?" he asked.

"About half-past-ten."

"Why didn't you send for me?"

"I did send to the theatre. You had gone—they didn't know where."

Norton flung his coat over the back of a sofa. . . . Why the devil couldn't they let him alone?

Bidding Willy good night, he sank down in the arm-chair by the fire, his chin in his palm, his eyes fixed upon the pictures in the flame.

Pictures . . . of full red lips against a pale skin . . . eyes dark but passionless, half-closed, and veiling perhaps a hint of mockery, a shadow of indifference. . . .

§ VIII

After all, so far as he ever discovered, Czartoryski had not wanted him for any very important reason. The thing was a ruse possibly, a trick to find out where he was. Little incidents like that were always cropping up, to remind him that he was living in a despotic country. Despotism and espionage, he had always heard, went together. And his experience now did not tend to make him modify that view of the matter. More and more he perceived that the English ideal of government by an hereditary oligarchy, a broad-based foundation of great families, was the right ideal. It had its limitations. Theorists, of one sort and another, could and did bring forward substantial objections to it. But so far as he could see, it worked better than any other system under the sun, and he was subtly gratified by the consciousness that he himself was part and parcel of it.

Meanwhile, the negotiations went on. The Foreign Office, on the whole, drove with a loose rein. So long as he fed them with readable despatches they let him alone. He gathered, indeed, from Lady Sheen's letters, that the fear of invasion was now again occupying the official mind to the exclusion of all else. Spectral boats, flat-bottomed, packed with Frenchmen, filled the home horizon.

Winter came, with biting winds, a cold sparkle of

sunshine. One went about in sledges, through a silent world. Over the dazzling, deadening snow, across a still, cream-coloured, faintly hazy landscape, the sledges sped. Before, magnificently maned, long-tailed horses prancing and pawing; within, a mound of fur, breathing with some difficulty; all around, the glittering pomp of frost-covered domes and spires and columns, against the blue of the sky.

Exhilarating, but tiresome too. The problem of keeping warm became a problem that ousted all others.

Life crystallised out into a routine. Ordinarily Norton rose at eleven, dressed, breakfasted, and read the morning papers; then work until four; a drive before dinner; the theatre, a ball, somebody's reception; finally, invariably almost, an hour with the Princess. . . .

Once or twice a week it had been at first, that hour with the Princess. Then it had become every other night. Now, there were few nights when he did not find his way to the little house near the Taurid Gardens. It was indiscreet and worse. He told himself so. The letters of Henrietta Sheen told him so, in no uncertain terms. The Princess told him so.

He shrugged. Indiscreet or not, he could not get on without it.

And yet, after all, it was little more than an anchorage—somewhere, a little way out of the world, where he could be himself, could think aloud and drop the precautions and reservations of his public manner. Once or twice that winter, he examined himself seriously, touching the nature of his feeling for the Princess. Was he drifting into love? That, of course, would be surprising, but not impossible. He decided,

however, that he was not falling in love with Princess Barbarov. She was his woman of the moment—nothing more than that. He would be grateful to her, when the time came for him to leave Petersburg, and he would always remember her with affection. But there was, quite definitely, nothing more in the affair than that.

Her divorce from her husband seemed to be making no progress. That gentleman lay low on his South Russian estates. And whenever the subject came up in conversation, Norton found it quite impossible to tell, from the Princess' vague replies to his questions, how the business stood, what she was doing in the matter or even whether she was really doing anything at all.

Lately, he noticed, there were often more people at her house than when he had gone there first. Odd people, writers, people with strange ideas, men with luminous, visionary eyes in long thin Russian faces. He listened to their talk and thought it all rather frothy and ill-digested. A lot of damned Girondins, he privately considered them.

Once he used the term to the Princess. The "Girondins" had stayed later, irritatingly later, than usual, and he had come to the end of his patience.

"But why do you call them that?" she protested, smiling.

"Because that is what they are."

She considered. "Girondins—revolutionaries. . . . Oh, no, Norton, they are not that. They don't want to kill anybody."

He tried to explain. No Girondin, he agreed, *wanted* to kill anybody. They were intellectuals, well-intentioned people, who wished to put everything and every-

body to rights with beautiful theories. "But you see, Princess, they set the ball rolling. They begin the trouble by finding fault and poking fun, writing and talking against the established order of things. And by and by the ball rolls too quickly for them. It gets out of hand, out of control. And then, some day, it crushes them."

She was thoughtful, pondering this. "You think that will happen to Russia?"

"I don't know. If it does, people like your Liberal friends will be to blame."

"But it will not come yet?"

"Nobody knows when that sort of thing is coming."

Another pause, then: "But, Norton, you think that the present way of things will last our time, don't you?"

He looked at her. Her eyes had the grave personal anxiety of a child's.

"You are incorrigible," he said.

She was full of astonishment. "Why?"

"I thought better of you, Natasha."

"Forgive me—I don't understand."

He told her, briefly, what he thought of people who lived only for their own hour. The English territorial aristocracy, that symbol of ultimate stability in the world, spoke in his slow, deliberate sentences.

She listened. When he had finished,

"I know," she said. "You think I and my friends are gnats dancing in the sunshine."

"You, perhaps. Not your friends. They are the disease that eats away the great tree and will bring it down one day."

"After I am gone," she murmured.

He smiled, a shade bitterly. "As you like."

"Don't be cross with me, Norton." She laid a hand on his arm. "They are very amusing—much more amusing than your landowners and—how do you say?—your *county families*."

He rose.

"I believe, Natasha," he said, "that you would rather have your Liberal Count Mourakin than me!"

She regarded him inscrutably.

The clock on the marble mantelpiece chimed twice. At that moment it seemed significant and appropriate—like a solemn warning that they had reached a danger point in both their lives.

§ IX

Afterwards, going home through the snow, he thought of that last word of his, that had slipped out so unguardedly. Unguarded, perhaps, wasn't quite the right expression. It wasn't that he had allowed something to escape which he had known and had been withholding. The phrase, the connecting his own name with Mourakin's, as though they had been rivals in love, had found utterance without the slightest intention on his part. He had been taken unawares. Now, as in the moment of silence that had followed the spoken words, they sounded in his mind like an involuntary confession of love, a revelation of something in him stronger than himself, more potent than his Fitzwarren caution, his Fitzwarren phlegm and self-sufficiency.

Still, he slept none the less soundly because of the incident. The Princess, in the days that followed, did not refer to it. And, by degrees, he managed to forget his regrettable lapse—or, at any rate to ignore it.

After all, the words themselves were very mild. They were capable of various constructions. He had probably worried himself quite unnecessarily.

Mourakin, too, who had apparently decided to resume his old friendship with the Princess, was a very good sort of man, if you could overlook his wild-cat ideas about politics and government. He talked well, was a mine of information on all kinds of subjects (in addition to his own particular subject of Greek and Roman art) and could marshal his knowledge impressively. A very able person, a very pleasant companion. . . . Of course, he did come too often to see the Princess. There was no getting away from that. Norton had warned her that Mourakin's friendship did her harm, that people were talking.

"And are they talking about you coming so often too?" she countered.

He had expected that.

"What bosh!" he said, in English.

She asked him what bosh was. As a rule they spoke in French, and her acquaintance with English slang was very slight.

"Bosh is nonsense," he told her. "Something absurd and silly."

"I see. Well, I do not agree that what I said was—bosh."

"Of course it was." He explained himself. "I am a foreigner, a bird of passage. In a little while, next month perhaps, perhaps next year, I shall be gone and may never return. It is only reasonable that while I am here I should frequent a salon that I find agreeable. . . . But with Mourakin it is very different. He lives here. He is a Russian, one of your own people. What more natural than that tongues should wag?"

She did not return to the charge, and they left it at that.

The winter passed. Spring, heralded by a gentle rain, captured Petersburg street by street. Where had been brilliant surfaces of frozen snow were now a series of sad-coloured lakes of liquid mud. The Neva, between its granite quays, melted again. Along the highway where a little time ago the sledges had gone, hundreds of little boats danced on the bright water.

And, in April, the Treaty was signed. Norton and Czartoryski agreed, at long last, how much money England was to find and how many troops Russia would send forth. The money and the men were alike to be the instruments of the Corsican's discomfiture. Each country gave what it had most of—what, perhaps, it valued least. Anyhow, they gave, or promised to give. The principals—the Mother of Parliaments, the Autocrat of all the Russias—had yet to query and examine and, finally, to ratify and sign. But the spade-work was done, the haggling, the “business” were settled.

Life, naturally, became rather duller. There was one interest less in Petersburg to make it tolerable. The usual work of the Embassy went on. The Foreign Office bag still came from London. But the object of his mission, the preliminary treaty, was finished.

He saw Natalya as much as ever. Once, she departed into the country for a fortnight on some mysterious errand of her own, and it was for him a fortnight of ennui and desolation. She had left no address. She did not tell him she was going. He merely went to her house one night at his customary hour and was informed by the *demoiselle de compagnie* that she had gone.

Something made him call, next day, at Mourakin's rooms. And apparently Mourakin, too, had left the capital for a season. . . .

With any other woman, that would have meant only one thing. Even with her——

He went home. Damn Mourakin! Damn him and damn him!

Somehow, he got through the fortnight. A whim took him the round of the second-hand bookshops, where curious old volumes could be picked up for very little. He had, ordinarily, small taste for such things. It was a sign of restlessness, of broken moorings, that he haunted the bookshops.

Sometimes, too, a curio shop would tempt him inside. After all, he would have to take home some presents to England, and curios were the most appropriate gifts he could think of, from one well-off person to another. His coal and iron accounts, on the land his father had left him, had just come from England, and he felt extremely opulent for the moment. The mines were bearing wonderfully, and the accounts made pleasant reading. So that when a dealer showed him a pretty white marble Diana and asked an exorbitant price for it, he did not flinch, but bought the thing.

A white marble Diana—Diana the chaste, the huntress. . . . Perhaps he would not take this home. Perhaps, if she would have it, he would give it to the Princess. After all, if she did not care for it, it would only be one more ornament in that crowded room.

A week dragged by. One day in the street he passed the Czar, out riding. The Autocrat, unpretentious as ever, with a solitary groom behind him, gave him a cold nod. Something seemed to have upset

his imperial good-humour. Still, it was useless worrying about such things. Royalties were difficult. Possibly the Narychkin had been unreasonable. Or perhaps the burden of despotic power weighed a little heavy that morning.

The Empress-Mother gave a ball on the following evening. A rather jolly woman, the Empress-Mother, a woman of the world—of two worlds, in fact, the apparent one and the next, the propriety of her bearing near the throne being only equalled by the pious humility of her behaviour in religious matters.

Norton had just danced a polonaise with the Czarina. The polonaise was a dance that he managed quite well. One walked about the room for five minutes, handing the same lady. That was practically all, and he felt he did not disgrace himself by his performance. He liked the Czarina, too, in a way, though she was not the cheerfulest of mortals. He wanted to comfort her, to help her to have a good cry. But with royalties, that sort of thing presents difficulties. And on the whole he was glad when the polonaise was over.

It was then that the Empress-Mother indicated her august desire to speak to him.

He bent over her chair, to catch the imperial words. "Milord," she said, with a disarming air of equality, "you will forgive a little plain speaking from an old woman. . . . No, don't begin protesting. Now, milord, you are desolate because somebody is away. Isn't that so?"

Norton regretted that he did not understand.

"Very well, that will do as well as another answer, I suppose. . . . Now, assuming that you were, for the sake of argument, desolate for the reason I mentioned, let me tell you that you would be very foolish."

The Empress-Mother paused. He waited for her to continue. After a moment the deliberate tones began again:

"A certain house, milord, is getting a bad name as a resort of the ultra-liberal element in Petersburg. And supposing you were to go often to such a house, it would do you harm. The Czar would be distressed. The Czar, as you know, is a liberal, enlightened ruler. But he dislikes persons of extreme and violent opinions."

"That is well-known, Your Majesty. But I do not hold those opinions."

"You go where they are spoken."

"I go where I am entertained, Your Majesty."

The royal eyebrows were elevated momentarily. A glance of sardonic amusement lit up the discreet features.

"The chaste Diana," said the Empress-Mother, "is due back in Petersburg on Thursday, I believe."

She dismissed him with that. He bowed, wondering. . . .

Next day he met Mourakin mousing around an antique shop. He recognized at once the slim, elegant figure, the high shoulders, the chiselled distinction of the features. Mourakin's face always reminded him of something out of Ancient Egypt, though he could never understand precisely why. A trick of modelling, the slant of the eyes, a suggestion of refined barbarism . . . it was difficult to say just where the resemblance lay.

Norton greeted him almost gladly:

"Hello, Mourakin, you're back again then?"

Mourakin smiled, as though to himself. "I haven't been away," he replied.

"But I called. I was told you were gone to the country."

"Exactly. You see, I was writing a paper. When I write, I have to protect myself from invasion. So I instruct my man accordingly."

Norton was obscurely conscious of relief. It was absurd, but the feeling was definitely there. Mourakin, he knew, was telling the truth. That much was evident to the least observant.

"When does the Princess return?" he asked.

A mask fell over the Russian's face. He shook his head.

"Nobody knows," he said.

"Where does she go, when she leaves Petersburg?"

The grave slanting eyes told nothing. Mourakin repeated: "Nobody knows."

They left the curio shop together and walked back along the streets towards the English Embassy.

"You have known Princess Barbarov long, milord?" Mourakin asked.

"I met her several times when she was quite a child. That is all."

"You made a great impression on her then."

Norton was incredulous.

"But it is true. Often, I have heard her refer to you and say there was no such gentleman in Russia."

"Yet she hardly seemed to notice me, so far as I remember."

Mourakin's hands went out in a vague gesture. "Children are unaccountable—especially little girls. It is impossible to say what is going on inside them."

They proceeded in silence for some minutes.

"In that way, milord," Mourakin resumed, following the trail of his thought, "Princess Barbarov is still

a child. I have known her for seven years, and I find her as incalculable now as she was at fifteen. Some women, I suppose, are like that."

Norton mused. "You knew her before her marriage?"

"For a while."

"What was the matter with Barbarov?"

"Nothing. Absolutely nothing. It was simply that she disliked him, unreasonably, as children will."

"And it is true that——?"

Mourakin seemed to wince. "Who shall tell the secrets of a man and his wife, milord? But that is the legend, certainly."

They shook hands outside the Embassy, and Mourakin sauntered away into the shadows of the Spring dusk. Norton glanced at him for a moment, then mounted the steps and went in under the heavy portico. . . . In all their meetings at the Princess' house, he had never talked to Mourakin alone. Now, at last, he seemed to be finding out something about the elegant and erudite Liberal. That he was poor, was common knowledge. His paternal estate had been gambled away by his father and his grandfather. Enough was saved from the wreck for him to live on quietly, unostentatiously. Three or four rooms, a manservant, books and a few good pictures, were not beyond his means. But he could not marry. He could not dream of marrying—not, at least, a woman of his own rank. Not, for example, a Princess Natalya Chirsky.

That, finally, was what the chance meeting in the antique shop had told Norton. Mourakin had badly wanted to marry the Princess. Long ago, as it seemed now, quite early in the reign of Lady Sheen, that little tragedy had been played out over here in Russia.

Whether the Princess had loved Mourakin then was another matter, beyond finding out. Probably not, Norton considered. And, of course, the tragedy was a very common one, familiar to every age, every country, even station of life. What was of interest, at the moment, was the knowledge that Mourakin still loved the Princess, that she was a fever in his blood, a bitterness that was almost certainly the inspiration of his Liberalism. . . .

In his study, where Willy was generally to be found at this hour of the day with a book, an armchair and a blazing fire, there was to-day no Willy to be seen. Sacks, who had apparently been doing some tidying in the room, was gliding out as Norton approached. Sacks looked queer, unhappy, as though he were afraid to trust himself to speak.

Norton wondered if the man were ill, or in some trouble.

"What's the matter, Sacks?" he called after him.

Sacks paused. "Nothing, sir."

"I thought you looked upset."

"Yes, sir. The English papers, sir——"

He suddenly walked off, leaving his announcement unfinished. Norton frowned. On the table in the study was a pile of newspapers, evidently newly arrived from England. They had not been there when he had left. He wished Willy wouldn't open the papers when they came. He must speak to the boy about it. One of them was open now, untidily flung down across the table.

He dragged off his gloves, sank down on to a chair, pulled the paper towards him. It was then that a familiar name, at the top of the printed sheet, struck him like a sharp blow between the eyes.

So that was it!

His eyes closed. The study, Russia, the world, revolved madly about his head. He heard his own voice repeating: "My God. . . my God. . . ." and, afterwards, "Mother——"

Gradually the whirling universe slackened its pace and came at last to a halt. His study at the English Embassy grew clear again. The normal outlines of life reasserted themselves. He returned to the passage in the newspaper:

"We regret to announce the death on Monday last, March 30th, of the Dowager Marchioness of Stone, at her house in Great Stanhope Street. . . ."

March 30th. Nearly a month ago.

He rose, and the newspaper fell to the ground. Standing by the uncurtained window, he watched, for long time, the descent of the twilight upon the roofs and domes of Petersburg.

Hours passed, or seemed to pass. Darkness invaded the room. The house was queerly, oppressively silent.

In his pocket, burning him, he was conscious of her last letter, a longish letter, not very cheerful regarding her own affairs, but beginning in the familiar style: "My dearest beloved Norton——"

He remembered, now, that he had never answered that letter. She had waited and hoped and found excuses for him. No doubt she had prayed. And nothing had happened. God had failed her.

The door opened. Willy, white-faced, with scared and anxious eyes, peered into the room.

Norton said: "Hello, Willy."

The deep voice, coming unexpectedly from the corner by the window, startled Willy.

"I thought you were gone out, sir," he said hurriedly.

"No."

"I'm afraid—you've had bad news, sir. I can't say how sorry—— When I saw it there, I felt—I couldn't tell you. I had to leave you to find out."

Then the Lord walked slowly back from the window and, surprisingly, put one hand on Willy's shoulder, looking at him earnestly in the gloom.

"Do you write to your mother regularly, Willy?" the Lord said.

"Yes, sir."

"Every post?"

"Almost every post, sir."

Something like a sigh reached Willy's ears. The Lord turned away again.

"Tell Sacks to bring some lights, will you please?" he said. . . .

When Sacks came with the lights the study was empty.

§ x

By degrees, as letters arrived from England, the details of Lady Stone's death emerged. She had apparently been spending a month at Bognor Rocks, for the sunshine and to bathe in the warm sea-bath they had there. After that, her intention had been to stay for some time with Charlotte and Charlotte's Duke, going on to Scotland to visit her own people about the middle of May.

She never got further than London. On the night following her return from Bognor Rocks she was

attacked by nervous twitchings. Her doctor, summoned urgently by Susan, who was in town, found her feverish and inclined to wander. She called a good deal for her son, those who were present said. Finally, after two days of restless semi-conscious tossings and frettings, the last storm burst over her. An epileptic fit, like some cruel murderous bludgeoning, left her just alive, quite peaceful now, conscious and full of quiet courage. The pulse grew hourly fainter. During the night of the 29th Susan, who was sitting at the bedside, fancied she heard a whisper. She bent over the grey head.

Her mother's eyes were wide open. The lips were moving soundlessly. Then the tiny whisper came again:

"Tell Norton——"

It ceased abruptly. Susan strained her ears to catch what might follow in a moment. But nothing came. Nothing ever came from those lips again.

Lady Sheen, calling next morning, found that all was over. . . .

For many years, the portrait of the Marchioness hung at Stone, opposite Norton's picture by Lawrence. It shows the Marchioness as a comparatively young woman, with dark piled hair and homely features. She is fingering some stringed instrument, that the painter seems to have put into her hands for the sake of the composition. A commonplace woman you would have said, looking at the portrait, a woman with no beauty, no charm. And, as you crossed the room at Stone to gaze at the painting of her son, you would wonder, you could not help wondering.

I have nothing to say against beauty and charm and distinction in women. I bow, as other men do,

before the face that launches a thousand ships, the loveliness that becomes a legend. But in life there are more crowns than one. Augusta, Marchioness of Stone, was a faithful and devoted wife to the man for whom she was little more than an accessory of dignified domestic existence, a man whose romances all lay far back in his youth. She was a good mother in an age of bad ones.

Honour and peace to her memory. . . .

§ XI

To Norton, in Petersburg, the passing of his mother was for a long time an unreality, made very little more definite by the accounts of the matter he received from his sisters and from Lady Sheen. He had left her on the threshold of the unfamiliar house at Eastbourne. She had gone back into the little entrance hall there, with its pictures of old ships-of-war and deceased admirals. And he would never see her again, neither in that seaside house, nor at Great Stanhope Street, nor anywhere.

Inevitably, there was a burst of grief, an avalanche that submerged him. Recollections of old tender-nesses, pictures of childhood, of Stone, a torrent of memories, tears. . . . He lay awake all night.

Then, in the morning, the torrent had ebbed. The claims of life, of his normal interests, occupied his mind. He was a little shocked and distressed at the ease with which his nature seemed to be accepting his loss. It was unnatural, ungrateful. Still, the recovery was unmistakably there. He could not deceive himself into the idea that he was unable to find any pleasure in the detail of his day.

Of course, at the back of normality, the shock re-

mained. Often and often, at the most incongruous moments—during the Czar's grand fête, for example, or over a game of piquet with the Empress-Mother, or while watching the Guards marching to the frontiers against Bonaparte—the remembrance of some similar incident in the past, some incident in which his mother had figured, would remind him that she had gone. He would never hear her inveigh against card-playing or extravagance or Charles Fox any more.

It would be necessary to go home to arrange things, to put her small affairs in order. That was evident from the first. And, on the whole, he was not sorry. He had accomplished his task. So far as he could tell, he had not done too badly. Hemingby seemed pleased. The London gossip, coming to him through Lady Sheen, indicated a general impression that his embassy had proved, in the public estimation at least, a success. Of course, Lady Sheen was partial. But, on the other hand, she had never in the past kept from him any criticisms she thought were good for his soul.

He wrote to Hemingby, requesting his recall, within a week of hearing of his mother's death, and, next day, he told the Princess what he had done.

He had made up his mind, during the night following the day those fatal English papers arrived, that he would give up the Princess. It was the sort of association his mother had disliked, the sort that in his own life had been a source of endless grief to her. He would not go again to the little house by the Taurid Gardens.

But that was night. In the night, things assume strange proportions. The sunshine, glancing across the bedroom through the gaps of the window-curtains, had brought a cooler view of his position. It would

be churlish, the action of a boor, to abandon the Princess' house without a word of explanation.

He called on the Thursday, the day the Empress-Mother, out of her inexplicable royal omniscience, had named as the one by which the Princess was expected back in Petersburg.

Everything was the same in the long room—the serried ranks of bric-à-brac, the *demoiselle de compagnie*, Princess Barbarov herself, in the reclining-chair by the window.

"You are early to-night, my friend," she greeted him.

"I did not go to the play. Am I too early?"

Her smile, something in the deep eyes, reassured him.

"We can talk now. Later, the others may come."

The *demoiselle* retired.

"You are looking well," he said, frankly.

"That is country life. I have been rustivating."

"Yet you are not a country type, Princess."

She considered this. "What is a country type?"

He was silent for a moment. Pictures of many women belonging to English county families, healthy, fresh-complexioned, big-boned women, arrogant and plain and aristocratic, passed across his mind.

"You would seem out of place among fields and lanes or riding over the downs," he said at last. "You are a—candle-light woman."

She laughed lightly. "I thought you were going to say an exotic bloom."

"So I was at first."

"But I am so glad you did not." Then, at his look of enquiry,

"I have grown tired of hearing that phrase about myself. After five years or so——"

The remembrance of Mourakin, strolling off in the dusk a few days ago, occurred to him.

"Speaking as brother to sister, Natasha——" he began.

He paused.

"Go on," she said. There was a hint of mockery at the corner of her full red lips.

"You must take me seriously," he warned her.

"Very well—brother."

He ignored that. "I was talking to Mourakin the other night," he resumed.

"I see." She appeared uninterested. "About me, you mean?"

He equivocated. "Not especially. But I couldn't help knowing how he feels about you."

She waited for him, grave as a child.

"Do you think it fair to Mourakin to let him come here as he does?" he said.

Outside the blue finale of the day was subtly changing. Night had almost come. The demoiselle brought candles and retreated again to her fastness.

"But you were scolding me about that before I went away," the Princess protested. "I thought we had finished with it."

He shook his head. "I was thinking of your reputation then. Now I am thinking of Mourakin's happiness."

"You are very kind to think of us all in that way, my friend. Do you ever think of yourself, and your own reputation and your own happiness?"

"Now you are angry with me, Princess."

"Not at all."

"You think I'm interfering."

"No."

"Insincere, then."

"I do not believe," she said, "that you know the workings of your own mind very well. That is your chief fault."

She laid a hand on his sleeve.

"You think I ought to marry Mourakin then?"

"He loves you."

"That is not everything." She mused for a while, her chin cupped in her palm. "Besides," she added, "I am not free. I am a married woman."

"You could be divorced."

"Easier said than done. This is not England, you know."

He grew impatient. "I don't believe you want to be divorced," he exclaimed. "I think you keep the idea going to emphasize the legend about yourself—nothing but that."

"What legend?" she demanded calmly.

He grasped the nettle. "That you are a virgin," he said.

His English sang-froid, that divine simplicity of manner and of intention that makes all statements permissible, carried them through the implications of the moment.

"That is not a legend," she replied.

"No?"

"No. It is the truth."

He looked at her with puzzled doubting eyes. "I don't understand you," he said. "And I don't understand Barbarov."

She was unperturbed. For the second time that evening she said:

"This is not England, you know."

Down below, the door-bell jangled, and a moment later, a servant announced Count Mourakin.

Norton rose to shake hands.

"You English are early risers, I always heard," Mourakin said in his soft voice. His eyes seemed to Norton to hold a shadow of reproach.

"You have been talking of the war, no doubt," he added. Then, without waiting for a reply,

"You and your subsidies, milord, will bring sorrow to many Russian homes before long. You will not have laboured in vain when the casualty lists begin to come in."

His tone, superficially light, carried an undercurrent of bitterness.

"Whatever is the matter with you, Count?" the Princess said.

He looked across at her inscrutably. "Only the burden of life, Madame."

"Oh, is that all?"

"Is it not enough?"

"No. Every life has a burden, just as every body has a skeleton. But it is only when we are ill that the skeleton seems heavy to drag about."

Mourakin pondered. "Then I suppose I am ill," he said. Norton coughed uneasily. This sort of talk annoyed him. It was so frothy, so remote from the known and acknowledged boundaries of decent conversation. Two people talking together could say what they liked, of course, but where there were more than two certain rules had to be observed. It wasn't quite proper of Natasha, it wasn't at all agreeable of her, to talk about her skeleton in that way. His mother would never dream of discussing such a delicate matter. . . . Never *have* dreamed, he meant.

Involuntarily, he frowned. Metaphysical talk flowed around him and over his head. Another visitor called

and joined in. He felt suddenly lonely, suddenly out of place. Nostalgia, the *maladie du pays*, swept over his heart in long, long waves. . . .

England, Trentshire, Stone; London, Cavendish Square, Great Stanhope Street; the sights and sounds and smells of home. . . . Training kept his features impassive, his outward semblance serene. But he was silent, even morose. He realised that, following some remark of Natasha's, Mourakin and the other visitor were beginning a defence of Robespierre and the French Terror, but he could not raise sufficient interest to take part in the argument. After all, there was nothing to argue about. Nobody in his senses could possibly excuse the Terror, unless his tongue were in his cheek.

He wondered whether the tongues of these men were in their cheeks, whether even Natasha's tongue might not be in *her* cheek. Possibly, when he had gone, they would laugh among themselves over his English stupidity, his heavy insular wits.

Well, he would risk it. He rose.

"You will excuse me, Princess," he said.

Her face fell. (He noticed that and felt that the reaction was genuine. The awareness of this dissipated, ever so slightly, his *malaise*.)

"So soon?" she pleaded.

"Milord is like those migratory birds who are the first to come and the first to go," Mourakin put in.

The second visitor questioned whether there were such birds. Generally, the first to come were the last to go, he suggested. Then Mourakin began an erudite defence of his simile and the conversation threatened to become a lecture.

Taking his chance at the end of one of Mourakin's periods, Norton repeated that he must really go.

"I have letters to write," he explained.

The Princess smiled up at him. "Despatches? State secrets?"

He shook his head sadly. "No. Private letters." Then he told her, very briefly, about Lady Stone.

"Oh, but—Norton, my dear——"

The other men made sympathetic noises. Mourakin bit his lip.

"You ought to have told me before," the Princess said.

As he bade her good-bye, he could see that her beautiful eyes were bright with tears. . . .

§ XII

That was the night he wrote to Hemingby for his recall.

Willy, coming in from a ball, found the Lord brooding over the fire. The Lord was monosyllabic and dull, which was annoying, as Willy wanted badly to tell somebody about a gorgeous Princess Marya Something-or-other he had danced with, a rare creature such as, apparently, had never before graced the unworthy soils of Russia or England. The Lord listened, then yawned. It was not an ostentatious yawn, but it implied a comprehensive indifference to Willy's Princess and all her works.

Willy accordingly departed in search of his brother attaché, or Sacks or anybody else who might listen. At the door, however, the Lord summoned him back.

"I've asked for my recall, Willy," he said.

Willy was upset. "But, sir——"

"I'm not a regular ambassador, as you know. I only came on a special mission."

"But don't you *want* to stay, sir?"

"No, Willy, I don't."

There was a momentary silence. "But," Willy resumed, rather anxiously, "what about—about us?"

"You attachés, do you mean?"

"Yes."

"You'll stay on with the new man."

"Oh, I see." Willy seemed relieved. "We shall be sorry to lose you," he said politely.

The Lord thanked him. "I'm sure you'll run the Embassy very well," he added, "and the Princess Marya What's-her-name also, I hope."

Willy blushed and felt encouraged. He began to disclose the details of his Princess' family—her father's rank and occupation, the situation of their estates—

"Shut the door, please, Willy," the Lord said. "There's a draught. . . ."

When Willy was gone Norton abandoned himself to his home-sickness.

"Like a ten-year-old schoolboy," he thought.

Well, so be it. Schoolboy or not, the craving for home was in his vitals. . . .

Next morning a note was delivered at the Embassy—a note from the Princess:

"Could you come and see me some time this afternoon?—N."

Just that. The man did not wait for an answer.

It was odd. Norton knew well enough that it is one thing to drift into a lady's salon in the evening, quite another to go by appointment to see her in the afternoon. Was it possible that she was, after all, a woman of gallantries? It seemed improbable. Legends like hers are not for nothing.

Well, he would soon find out. . . .

At three he mounted the steps outside the Princess' house. A parcel, neatly wrapped by Sacks that morning, was under his arm.

A servant conducted him upstairs. At the head of the stairway he began to go towards the long room where he and the Liberals foregathered in the evening, but the demoiselle suddenly appeared and announced that Madame was in her boudoir.

She added: "Madame asked me to bring you there. She is resting."

He followed her.

"Madame is well, I hope?"

"A bad headache, milord."

She held upon a door at the end of a short passage and closed it behind him.

The Princess was on a sofa, among cushions embroidered with pink roses

"You got my note?" she asked, at once.

"Yes. Your man did not wait for an answer."

"I told him there would be no answer."

Norton sat down on a chair beside her. "You relied on my coming?"

"Yes. I knew you would come."

"I might have had work to do."

"What of that?"

"Well, in that case, obviously I could not have come, could I?"

She regarded him through half-closed eyes for a moment, but apparently decided not to pursue the matter.

"How is your headache?" he asked.

"I have no headache, Norton."

"Oh, I see. Your companion told me——"

She shook her head impatiently. "Yes, yes—I had a headache, so far as Thérèse was concerned. One must have an excuse for bad temper."

The pink roses of the cushions were singularly out of harmony with her dark head. He wondered how such an intelligent woman could choose cushions which were so clearly not her proper background.

"You are unhappy," he said, gently.

She nodded. "Headache or heartache, they are all one. . . . It is what Mourakin calls the burden of life."

"You made light of that last night," he reminded her.

"Did I?" She paused. The absorbed inward expression of her eyes was more than usually noticeable. "Do you know," she added, "I cried last night in bed, thinking of your mother, dying like that so far away from you. And you not knowing. It seemed so mean of God to do a thing like that, so despicable!"

Her little outburst amazed him, but he kept his form.

"There are many things we cannot understand," he replied.

The sententious formula sounded weak, so he reinforced it with repetition.

"Many things," he reiterated, solemnly, "that we shall never understand."

Glancing up at her he saw the old mocking twist at the corners of her lips. A desire to test her, perhaps to hurt her for laughing at him, made him add:

"I wrote to England for my recall when I got back last night."

At first she did not seem to understand. "Your recall? You are going to England?"

He nodded. "My work here is done."

"But—you will come back?"

"No. I shall not come back."

She was silent, lying there with her head against those absurd pink roses, her eyes fixed on the budding branches of a tree outside the window. It was very quiet in the little room. Abruptly, she put out both hands towards his. He felt their touch, cold and delicate, yet sensuous. Her lips moved:

"Pourquoi partir?"

"I *must* go back," he said.

"But why?"

He made a vague gesture. "A thousand reasons—to see to my mother's affairs—all sorts of things."

She pondered this.

"How soon will you leave?" she demanded.

That, he told her, was impossible to say. Many arrangements had to be made. It might be Autumn before he finally left Petersburg.

She seemed relieved. "Then there are still six months."

"It may be that much."

Restlessness, an uneasy feeling that matters were going too far, sent him strolling round the room, looking at pictures, picking up books, gazing down into the street. From the window, without preamble, he said:

"Why did you want me to come here this afternoon?"

She shrugged. "Is not there an English proverb about looking a gift horse in the mouth?"

"Yes."

"Well, then——"

"You are impossible," he told her, "an impossible, incorrigible child!"

"Very well. . . . I was desolate, and I asked you to come and see me, to comfort me. And you say I am impossible."

"When did Mourakin go last night?" he asked.

"I don't know. Very late."

He saw that she had something more to add, and waited. In a moment:

"He was tiresome," she said. "He wanted to make love to me. And he is jealous of you. He doesn't like you coming here."

"He knows well enough we are only friends."

"Yes. Only he does not believe in that sort of friendship very much. . . ." She stopped, smiling faintly as at some slightly amusing recollection. "Oh, Norton," she continued, as the mental picture found expression, "he was outrageous last night. You cannot think how outrageous. He accused you of being my lover!"

From his post by the window he looked across at her. . . . Her lover? That cold, wonderful creature's lover? She was certainly lovely, lying there. Nothing in the world could be lovelier. . . .

He crossed the room and sat down near to her on the sofa. She met his gaze steadily.

"Your lover," he repeated. "But how ridiculous!"

"So I told Mourakin."

"And he did not believe it?"

"No."

He bent and kissed her lips. . . .

Eyeing him reproachfully, when she had released herself,

"Why did you do that?" she asked.

He countered: "Why did you ask me to come here?"

"I don't know. Not for that, though."

That, he perceived, was the truth. She did not know. Impulse, carelessness, a momentary surrender to ill-apprehended forces within her—there was nothing more deliberate than that.

"I am forgiven?" he questioned her.

Smoothing her hair, which had become disarranged,

"You are forgiven," she said.

He rose to go, and as he did so remembered the parcel which he had left on a small table by the door. He fetched it and placed it in her hands.

"I brought you a present, Natasha."

"That was charming of you."

"No. I got it for my sister. It was only afterwards that I decided it was more suitable for you."

She unwrapped it with childish eagerness.

"Diana!" she exclaimed. The little white marble figure plainly delighted her.

"You like it?" he enquired, humbly.

"It is exquisite. . . . Diana, the Huntress."

"The Chaste."

They looked at each other. . . .

CHAPTER IV

NATALYA

§ I

THERE followed a long period of irritating uncertainty as to his own movements. In due course he heard from Hemingby, at the Foreign Office, that his request had received consideration and that arrangements could be made to replace him. He stayed on, watching eagerly for the Foreign Office bag, living the old round of official business, official entertainment and private pleasure which he had evolved for himself. In the summer he took a small furnished house two miles out in the country, where there were fishing and shooting to be had—and also, less fortunately, gnats and mosquitoes. Moreover, he saw less of Natalya when he was in the country, and, as a natural consequence, was bored. He endured it for a fortnight, then fled back to the Embassy. Some days after his return, however, the Princess confided to him that she, too, had taken a suburban villa—which, on enquiry, he discovered to be situated within a mile of his own.

By good luck he had not given up his tenancy. . . .

That summer month with Natalya in the country, he came nearer to her than, he felt, he had ever come to any woman. She was, of course, an annoying creature, full of racial inexplicabilities that were constantly frustrating him; and, also of course, there could not but be, now and then, repetitions of the afternoon episode in her boudoir at Petersburg: yet, in

spite of these undoubted blemishes, the picture was on the whole a fair one.

They allowed themselves to become romantic and sentimental. He took her boating on the river that flowed by the end of his garden. They drove together. They had music at midnight in her drawing-room, he singing, she accompanying him at the pianoforte, the yellow candle-light gilding the polished wood of the instrument, a bowl of pale flowers, the white arms and shoulders of the Princess.

She reminded him that he had once called her a "candle-light woman".

They were by the pianoforte. She was teaching him some French songs, and they had just tried one over for the tenth time. Now, for a few minutes, they paused, idle, peaceful, happy.

"That was true," he replied lazily, "you are a candle-light woman."

He gazed at her across the top of the pianoforte, along which he had sprawled his long figure.

"Or perhaps not a woman at all," he amended, after a moment.

The cryptic afterthought caused her to glance up quickly.

"Why not a woman, Norton?"

"You know why," he said.

Her hands played lightly over the keys.

"Do you think I shall always be white marble?" she asked, gravely, with her eyes lowered upon the keyboard.

"So long as you are afraid."

"Afraid of what?"

"Of loving."

The hands became still. The little tune she had

been playing died away. Raising her great eyes to his,

"I am not afraid of loving, Norton," she said.

His silence challenged her. When she spoke again her voice was mournful:

"Perhaps we do not mean the same thing when we speak of love."

"There are many kinds of love."

"Not for me."

Outside in her garden a night-bird called harshly.

"What kind of love do you want?" he asked her.

She considered. "Not light love—not your sort, Norton—No, don't look like that. I didn't mean to hurt you. But it's true, isn't it?"

"No," he said.

"Yes, it is. You have been loving and riding away ever since I first saw you, when I was a little girl and you came to call on my mother."

"I haven't hurt anybody."

"How do you know that?"

Then, as he did not reply,

"That was all you offered me. Light love. And I don't want it, Norton dear, I don't want that sort of love!"

He laughed shortly, uneasily. Walking over to the long windows that opened on to the lawn, he stood irresolute. In the glass, the candles, the bowl of pale flowers, the eyes of Natasha were given back. He could see that she was looking his way. Distress, the bitter awareness of her sad and disapproving gaze, welled up in him. They had been so happy together, he and she. Something that was almost the desire for marriage, for a single and absolute devotion, entered his mind. To live with Natasha, to marry

her, to be the father of her children, to try, however foolishly, to perpetuate this contentment of spirit. . . . It would be so easy. He had only to turn and say what was, at that moment, in his heart. She would understand. She would understand that he loved her. And she would trust him not to betray her. Her cool hands would touch his head, bowed in her lap. . . .

His mind moved onward. Details emerged—of her divorce, of their marriage, how it would be received in England, what London would say, what Mourakin would do about it, how Natasha would settle down in a strange country, far from her own people——

Then, abruptly, the spell was broken.

Of course, it was nonsense. He did not want to marry and he did not intend to marry. The moment, the situation, the romance of a summer night, had nearly led him into a *sottise*.

He turned.

"It's getting late," he said. "I must be going."

He could not help observing the sudden droop of the lids over her deep eyes, as though he had said something almost indecent.

"Shall I see you to-morrow?" she asked.

The white hands were straying over the keyboard again. Her composure, when she looked up, was a little forced, as though the edge of tears were not far off.

Outside, the night-bird squawked ambiguously to its mate.

§ II

Still, on the whole, they were happy then. There was no tiresome diplomatic hospitality, no coterie of

Liberals around Natasha, no Mourakin. To drive into Petersburg, to deal with such urgent business as might have turned up at the Embassy, and then to drive back again to the country house, to the benison of private life, was a source of keen delight. He knew, in his secret heart, that what made the greatest part of his content was the having Natasha to himself. But Norton had never investigated very closely the contents of his secret heart. Once or twice that organ had revealed itself to him without warning, and he had been frightened. He had had to put it in its place brusquely, without ceremony or much consideration. And in general he was careful not to disturb it.

They returned to Petersburg in September. It was dull there, socially speaking. The Czar was away with the Army. There were no court functions, few big private entertainments. The military caste, generals and their subordinates, whose dashing uniforms were wont to add colour and vitality to Petersburg balls, had departed into Poland—or perhaps it was Austria. News was sparse, Bonaparte moved quickly, and one could not be sure where battle would be given. That there would be battle, nobody could doubt. Apart from the fact that England was paying, and would expect to see something definite in return for her money, the career of the Corsican was a menace to Russia. It was unthinkable that, when it came to the point, Russian valour would not send the mongrel howling back to France with his tail between his legs.

At Natalya's they thought otherwise. Mourakin and most of the frequenters of the salon were pro-French. They prophesied the early collapse of the committee of allied generals, part Russian, part Austrian, part

Prussian, who were pitted against the single genius of Bonaparte.

Norton listened, saying little. He hated this damned Whiggish defeatism. And he was aware that, sometimes, Mourakin talked at himself, ridiculing England for supposing that she could ever overthrow the greatness of Imperial France. It was disagreeable, but he listened. He was personally interested in the fate of the Russian armies. It was he who had negotiated the Treaty. His hand, guiding the pen, had set the machine in motion. Of course, he was only the agent, the humble instrument of Pitt. But he had been responsible up to a point. He had had to satisfy himself that the Russian troops were worth paying for, that England was not being sold a lame horse. And if things went desperately wrong, he would be censured.

Then, one day in the October of that year, the Foreign Office bag contained a notification that he was to be replaced. Arrangements had been made. Somebody or other, a Scotch peer, some Gordon or Hamilton, a man he hardly knew, was to be Ambassador in his stead. He could return to England as soon as he had taken formal leave of the Czar.

He told Natalya, that same evening. Mourakin was in retreat, writing a paper, and other callers, such as there were, were denied. Now that the moment had come, Norton found himself depressed beyond his extremest anticipations. He was conscious that, quite involuntarily, he sighed ever and again like a stage lover, that he gazed yearningly around the long room with the triple windows at each end, and that he was inexcusably silent.

Natalya sat by the pianoforte, playing to herself. Abruptly, *à propos* of nothing,

"Where's the Diana?" he said, glancing up at her.

"Not here," she replied.

"Where do you keep it?"

"In my boudoir." She stopped playing and crossed the room to where he sat. "What's the matter with you to-night?" she said, standing before him, her hands clasped behind her back, and eyeing his downcast face like an anxious mother.

It was then that he told her.

She took it well.

"You'll have to find the Czar first, I suppose," she said, casually.

"That ought not to be difficult."

"And then—you'll come back here—to clear up?"

He shook his head slowly. "I shall go back through Prussia. I shan't come back here—any more."

Their eyes met. The memory of a hundred evenings in this same room, the recollections of their country holiday together, the spirit—like a delicate, wistful little tune—of the whole strange relationship, begun at the Swedish Ambassador's ball nearly a year ago, ending now in this familiar salon by the Taurid Gardens: all these, implicit, unspoken, imponderable, hung in their long, long gaze.

She was the first to return to the claims of the moment.

"When will you go?" she asked.

Almost at once, he expected, if the Embassy business allowed.

"To-morrow? Next week?"

"Next week, perhaps."

She pondered. "A week. . . ." Seating herself

lightly on the arm of his chair: "I shall be sorry to lose you, Norton."

He looked up gratefully. "That's so good of you to say that."

"But it is true. Life will be duller for me."

"For me, too."

"Yet—you want to go?"

"Yes, I must go."

He said it firmly. He was by no means so sure now of that necessity, and it was therefore desirable to reiterate it. His home-sickness was less than it had been. His mother's affairs were, after all, so tiny they could easily wait. But he had made his plans. He could not get back the Embassy now. And, in any case, he was averse, racially and as a member of the Fitzwarren family, to changing his mind once it was made up.

"What will you do?" he asked her, listlessly.

She shrugged. "What should I do? Very much as I have done this past year, I suppose. You know what my life is, well enough."

"It is lonely," he said.

"It was."

"And will be?"

"I suppose it will be."

Silence, a musing melancholy silence, fell between them again. Breaking it, he asked:

"You will write to me?"

"Why do you want me to do that? What could I tell you, that you would want to read?"

He considered. "News of Petersburg," he said, "the gossip of the town. And about yourself."

"You will really like to read about myself?"

"Of course."

She laughed. "Among your old friends you will soon forget this room and me."

"No." He put his large hand over her slight, pale one. "No, I shall never forget you, Natasha."

"Perhaps, when the war is over, I shall come to London and see you."

"That would be very jolly. I should love to show you London."

The thought of her in the surroundings that were so dear to him momentarily filled his mind. . . . Natasha in Piccadilly, or driving along Whitehall; Natasha at the London routs, in the well-known stately houses that were his world; Natasha, loveliest of all those lovely women, elusive, distinguished. . . . There would be whispers, nudgings, hurried comments. "The new Lady Norton Fitzwarren. . . ." He would be so proud of her. . . .

He came back to earth.

Damn!

"What were you thinking of?" she asked him softly.

"Just nonsense," he replied.

"Nothing else?"

He rose. "Nothing else. Nothing but nonsense. I day-dream like a boy lately."

Looking at his watch,

"I may come and see you to-morrow?"

She nodded.

"You will be alone?"

"Yes."

Her eyes were suddenly full of sadness. Bending over the chair on the arm of which she still sat, he took her hands in his.

The deep eyes closed for a moment, then she pushed him gently away from her.

"Good-bye," she said. . . .

§ III

That, indeed, was their real good-bye. He saw her again but she did not keep, for some obscure reason, her promise to be alone. Mourakin finished his paper and came out of seclusion. The Liberals were no longer denied.

Possibly she felt that she had a memory of Norton too precious to be risked in the company of some later, less perfect parting; perhaps she feared that her legend would not withstand a week of evenings alone together, with that prospect of final separation over the threshold of the last evening: the motives of Princess Barbarov were always obscure, even to herself.

But whatever her motives may have been, she kept her poise until Norton's carriage was out of sight. Surrendering nothing, revealing nothing, she concluded the affair in her own indeterminate, enigmatic fashion.

Petersburg watched her, watched for the signs of secret tears, of private desolation. But Petersburg watched in vain. She went about, if anything, rather more than she had done before. That was all. And that, by general consent, was not necessarily to be taken as evidence of a broken heart.

It chanced that, about this time, Willy, who had remained at the Embassy to assist the counsels of the new Ambassador, met at a reception his acquaintance with the pearl epaulettes and the wizened countenance.

There was a half-recognition on the part of the wizened gentleman.

"We met at the Swedish Ambassador's," Willy reminded him, "almost a year ago."

The wizened man remembered. "Of course. . . Lord Norton Fitzwarren's attaché. I recall our conversation perfectly."

"About fox-hunting, I believe."

"Was it? I cannot recollect that part. We talked of Princess Barbarov, did we not?"

Willy decided to be diplomatic.

"Ah, indeed," he observed, darkly.

"And about Lord Norton's chances," continued the wizened man. "We disagreed, I remember."

The matter, Willy confessed, had escaped him.

"And so Lord Norton is going?" the wizened man said.

"He has gone."

"H'm. So soon. Recalled, may I ask?"

"At his own request."

The wizened man looked cynically across his nose at Willy.

"Loyalty," he murmured. "Very creditable."

Willy explained that he had, in this instance, intended his remark to be taken as the truth.

"His mission was finished, you see. He didn't come as a regular Ambassador. There were urgent private affairs in England he had to attend to——"

"And Princess Barbarov was not kind, perhaps," the wizened man added, mildly.

Willy shrugged. "That would surely have been a reason for staying."

"You mean——?"

"He was not used to defeat, Monsieur."

"No. I see." The wizened man clearly considered that this was quite a point. "And you think," he added, "that his lordship did suffer defeat?"

"How should I know that?"

"You were advantageously placed to know something of it."

There was a stir at the door. In a moment the hostess of the evening was hurrying to greet the late-comer.

"The Barbarova," Willy heard the wizened man mutter.

She was looking round at the company. Her manner, serene, a little tired, seemed to comment unfavourably upon what she saw.

"Talk of angels," said Willy.

"I beg your pardon."

"An English saying——"

But the wizened man apparently proposed to take him literally.

"Angels, you say. . . . She is no angel. A devil, perhaps. A cold-hearted devil of a woman. Look at her, proud, supercilious, flaunting herself before us. . . ." His wizened features took on an ancestral ferocity, a look of the Kalmuck. Through the pearl epaulettes, the star, the gorgeous uniform, the Parisian manners, you caught a glimpse of the ancient Tartar chief, robbing and ravishing the plains. It was a look that, at another time, in some other place, would have boded ill for the Princess Barbarov.

Willy, glancing at the venomous profile, was conscious of an uneasy disgust. But the wizened man recovered himself.

"Did I not tell you, Monsieur," he observed urbanely, "that Lord Norton would sigh in vain?"

Willy replied that, so far as his recollection served, this was so.

"Well, I was right."

"Indeed!"

"Yes. The signs are infallible." He opened a jewelled snuff-box with deliberation. "And I will tell you another thing," he added.

Willy waited.

"I tell you," the wizened man said. "I tell you that Petersburg has not seen the last of Lord Norton Fitzwarren."

"You mean—that he will come back because of Princess Barbarov?"

The wizened man nodded and, with portentous gravity, took a pinch of snuff.

"Yes," he said, "I mean—precisely that."

§ IV

Meanwhile Norton was seeking the Czar and the Russian armies. It was a strange episode. A thousand miles, through a wild country, are not to be faced lightly. His mind, the set and ordered mind of the provincial aristocrat, was invariably more susceptible to the attacks of boredom than to the claims of curiosity. The unusual, the bizarre, did not intrigue him. He was not amused.

And, besides, he had worries. Apart from Natalya, apart from the worry of having that silent and bewildering ghost travelling with him, night and day, rarely absent from his carriage for an hour at a time, there were other anxieties of a different kind.

Rumours, as he approached the theatre of war, became more and more plentiful, and, unhappily, more and more ominous. The Austrians, it seemed, were doing badly. The French had won everywhere. They were taking toll of the towns, the villages, the convents, according to their custom. There was even an incredible story that Mack, with the whole Austrian army,

had surrendered. That of course was, on the face of it, absurd.

But as the days went by the rumours ceased to be rumours. Official statements, eye-witnesses' accounts, confirmed the bad news. The incredible had to be believed. Mack was done for. Somehow or other, he had given the game to the French without a fight. And Murat, with a few soft words, had tricked and lied his way over the bridge that commanded Vienna. The French troops had crossed the bridge, crossed it easily, without losing a man. Bonaparte slept, or could sleep if he chose, in the Emperor's bed.

Inexplicable—but also irrefutable. . . .

Still, Russia was not yet actively in the field. Bonaparte had to reckon with the Cossacks before he could call himself master. There was hope, even so late as this, that he might be beaten.

About the middle of November Norton reached Olmütz. The little town was full of the military—aides galloping about, soldiers of infinite varieties, generals and the entourages of generals. After endless enquiry he secured accommodation for himself, Sacks, and his two carriages. He was, he perceived clearly, of no account here. Everybody was excited about the battle that, people said, was bound to come very soon now. He, a mere sightseer, a civilian, was in the way. The sooner he ceased to trouble Olmütz with his presence, the better everyone would be pleased.

He tried to see the Czar. By letter, by visits to the royal headquarters, by private entreaties to influential army men he had met at Petersburg, he sought the imperial ear. It was all useless. The Czar was too busy. The English Ambassador must wait.

He waited. November passed. Then, on the first

day of December, he was suddenly commanded to the audience-chamber. The Czar was nervous, perfunctory. He expressed vague regrets, hoped Lord Norton Fitzwarren would honour Petersburg again, enquired politely regarding the new Ambassador.

It was all over in ten minutes.

That day there were great marchings of troops. The French were known to be close. Norton, returning to his inn, was held up by an endless column of Russian infantry. He watched them, line after line, on their way to their destiny. Perhaps, to their death. . . . And he, the Englishman, was in a sense responsible.

They were gone at last. The tail of the column disappeared round the corner.

At the inn Sacks was talking to a maidservant. Sacks had been talking to maidservants at inns for thirty years. Italy, Russia, Austria—differences of race, barriers of language, seemed hardly to incommode him at all. He was not a libertine. His taste was too delicate for that. He picked and chose. But where he chose, he rarely chose in vain. It was not, after all, very singular. As Sacks, in drink, was wont to remark: "There are no gentlemen in the world like English gentlemen. And there are no gentlemen's servants like English gentlemen's servants!"

This afternoon as Norton entered, Sacks left the maidservant and followed his master upstairs.

"Excuse me, sir," he opened.

Norton said: "Yes, what is it, Sacks?" His voice was tired and impatient.

"I was thinking I'd begin to pack right away, sir."

"Why? What's the hurry?"

"The hurry, sir," Sacks announced, with relish, "is the French!"

Norton looked up at him sceptically. "What do you mean by that?"

Sacks explained. The maidservant, it appeared, had been giving him the state of local opinion on the subject of the coming battle. "Perhaps to-morrow, the young woman told me. Perhaps not so soon. But not long, anyway." He paused for effect. "And around here," he added significantly, "they don't seem to think much of the Russians' chances."

Norton smiled. "You understood her wrong."

"No, sir. I understood her all right."

"Well, I'm not going to be bundled about by any cock-and-bull story of yours, Sacks."

"No, sir."

"Very good. Now go and talk to your young woman about something else."

"Yes, sir."

Sacks, obedient but concerned, took his departure. It was no good arguing with his master when that obstinate mood was on him, he knew well enough. Still, he would begin packing, in case anything happened. No need to tell Lord Norton what he was doing. Then if the French came one stood a chance of getting away. Sacks had heard of gentlemen (and gentlemen's servants) who had been in French prisons for years. Not military either. Just private gentlemen, travelling. A prison, in Sack's mature view, was a prison, whatever country it was in. And Sacks had no intention of finishing his romantic career in one.

The master's obstinate fit lasted all next day. He lounged on a sofa, reading a little, mostly doing nothing. Sacks guessed what the matter was. That Russian woman, that Princess. She had stuck out. And the master wasn't used to it. Nor was he, Sacks, used to it,

so far as that went. Sacks' women never stuck out. Or anyhow, if they did, so much the worse for them.

The day passed uneasily. Rumours flew around. The name of a village or something, the name of Austerlitz, ran from lip to lip. . . . Sacks, quietly, went about his packing, saw that the carriages were easily got at, the horses in good trim. The maidservant followed him out to the stables, having observed him through her bedroom window as he crossed the yard. She had been crying. Sacks, by linguistic methods of his own, ascertained the cause of her trouble. She was afraid. The French. She was afraid of what would happen to her if the French came. People said the French would certainly come now.

Sacks listened, pieced it together, comforted her. . . .

At six the following morning, in the raw cold darkness, Norton became gradually conscious of somebody touching his shoulder. He sat up quickly, leaning on one elbow.

"Who's that?"

A voice replied: "Me. . . . Sacks."

"What the devil do you mean by waking me at this hour?"

The dim figure that was Sacks fumbled for a light. Presently the candle on the table by the bedside revealed his tousled person, in shirt and breeches, with frightened, anxious face.

"The French are coming," he gasped, shivering.

"You've been telling me that for days. Go to bed and don't be a damned fool!"

"But, sir——"

"Go to bed, I say."

"But, for God's sake, sir——"

Norton sat bolt upright. "What is the matter with you, Sacks?"

The reply came in fearful, staccato sentences:

"The young woman in the house warned me, sir. They've been up all night waiting for news. It's just come. We've been beaten, sir. The French are swarming everywhere. They'll be in the town any time now——"

"How did the news come?"

"Russian soldiers, sir. They're all retreating. . . . Listen, sir!"

Down the cobbled street came the noise of a distant rumbling, a confused, disorderly sound, that suggested the whip and the curse, and a mad struggle to get away.

"Artillery, sir," said Sacks, in a half-whisper.

The rumble came nearer. Norton sprang out of bed and peered through the window at the dark street below.

Yes, there they were, the Russian guns. . . . So this was the end of his mission, the end of all his careful diplomacy. Defeat, a shameful rout, the annihilation of all that he had worked for. . . . What in hell could have happened? He had seen the armies marching out of Petersburg, marching to the frontier. Only a day or two ago, from his carriage, he had watched that long column going into battle.

And now—this!

He turned.

"Get everything ready, Sacks. At once."

Sacks heaved a sigh of relief. "Yes, sir."

"Can you do it in a couple of hours?"

"Do it in an hour, sir."

The darkness of the landing closed around him.

They got off within the hour. . . .

§ V

Nobody met the boat at Yarmouth. Norton had written to Hemingby, officially, and to Lady Sheen, unofficially, telling them his plans. But there were endless delays—accidents to the travelling-carriage, waits at frontier towns, then at last a contrary wind that made of the voyage home a demoralizing crawl.

Still, Yarmouth, England, were attained at last. He could step on the quay, look around, breathe the English air again. The little fishing town went its ways, not perceptibly excited by his arrival. It had been living its life, this grey coming and going had been in progress, every day, since that October morning when he set sail for Russia, more than a year ago. And, as a corollary, it occurred to him that at this moment the Petersburg life that had become so familiar to him would also be proceeding just as before—and he would not be a part of it. That seemed wrong, somehow. It was definitely disagreeable to think of Petersburg society getting on without him. . . .

Later, posting to London, taking in the beloved details of the English scene, he felt better. Petersburg receded, and he was content that it should. To go back to his old life, to take up the threads again, to amuse himself, with society and women and politics, in the ancient way . . . that was what he felt he wanted most. Politics, perhaps, not so very much. Out there, in that foreign country, politics had come to mean very little. The petty intrigues, the bitterness and the bickerings, had seemed very far away. Out there, he stood for England. Not for a party, not for Whig or Tory. But England, the kind mother, in whose eyes Westminster is no more than a quarrel-

some nursery. . . . That was how it had appeared in the Petersburg days. When Lady Sheen wrote to him about the latest secret surrender, the last doubtful compromise, he had been conscious less of distaste than of indifference. Those things simply did not matter.

The thought of Lady Sheen occupied his mind for some time. She would be a year older, at a time of life when a year was apt to make devastating changes. That was not a pleasing reflection. Still, they were friends. They would always be friends. In his heart, beyond the chances of time and fate, he knew that this was so. . . . He wondered what she would say to him about Natalya. She had been very cross when he began to go so often to the Taurid Gardens. Well, he would be able to put his case now. Pen and ink always made him dumb, a creature of unbelievably stilted formality. But a warm room, tea, the January dusk enveloping the world outside long, first-floor windows—in those surroundings he could be himself.

Sacks had gone on in advance to Great Stanhope Street, and when Norton reached the door he found the house prepared. There was a bad moment as, going upstairs to change his clothes, he had to pass the door of his mother's boudoir. Involuntarily he paused. If only he could have knocked, have heard the familiar tones telling him to enter, then opened the door. . . . He would never do that again. The grate in that room was cold, would always be cold as long as the house was his. She would not poke the fire there any more, would not look round at his entrance, would not say, with assumed sharpness: "Nonsense, Norton!" All that was over. . . . Home-coming, he began to see, has its own burden to bear. The Prodigal

Son, for example, did one know the end of his tale, may be assumed to have had to make terms with a state of life in which the fatted calf was only an unimportant ceremonial prelude. . . .

At Cavendish Square, whither Norton betook himself directly after dinner, he was disappointed. Lady Sheen was out of town.

He saw her son, Willy's elder brother, the heir to the Earldom, who was the only representative of the family at home. Even he, it appeared, was just going out.

"Mother went to her sister's at Christmas," he explained. "The Duchess was taken ill soon after, and mother is still cherishing her."

"You mean—at Belgravia House?" Norton enquired.

"No—at Richbury."

Norton's face fell. Richbury—in Derbyshire. That was a damned nuisance.

"When is she coming back?" he asked.

The heir really didn't know. He supposed it would be when the Duchess was better. Meanwhile, he hated to hurry Lord Norton but he had to be at the Trevivians' in ten minutes.

"The Trevivians'?" Norton wondered if he had heard aright.

"Oh, yes, we're very thick there at present. Mother's going to catch him for the Whigs. I'm supposed to be holding the fort while she's away."

Norton considered. "I'll come along with you," he said.

The heir departed to collect his fashionable hat, coat, gloves, stick and such other adornments as are proper to heirs going out for the evening.

As he re-entered the room where Norton was waiting,

"You've heard, of course," he said, "about Mr. Pitt?"

No, Norton had not heard.

"Very ill," said the heir, impressively laconic.

They descended the front steps together. Norton said:

"Nothing serious, I hope?"

The heir made non-committal noises.

"Overwork, presumably?"

"Presumably. And worry. The collapse of those damned Austrians, you know. And Russia going to pieces like that——"

The heir paused, apparently to consider whether this might not be a reflection on the recent diplomacy of his companion.

"I suppose," he added cautiously, "you must have felt rather savage about that business."

"About Austerlitz?"

"Yes."

This time it was Norton's turn to shy at committing himself. He was disappointed at missing Lady Sheen, and in no mood to reveal his mind to this confident youngster.

"It's all over now," he replied, vaguely.

The heir agreed, and added something about spilt milk.

"We shall fight on alone," Norton said.

There was a momentary silence. Their footsteps, the tap of their canes upon the flags, filled the gap.

"Fight on alone, shall we?" the heir remarked, at last.

"Of course."

"We shan't if the Whigs take office."

This, looked at in any light, was a most surprising

remark. Norton laughed deprecatingly, as at a poorish joke.

"No, I mean it," the heir protested.

"But how can the Whigs possibly take office?"

"They might take office—if anything happened to Mr. Pitt."

Norton laughed again, a little uneasily this time. Was this young fellow talking large, to make an impression? Or was Pitt really so ill as that, so ill that people were speaking of his death as a practical possibility? Before he had settled the matter in his mind, they reached the lit windows of the Trevivians' house.

"Here we are!" the heir announced.

"Trevivian's sure to have the latest news about Pitt," he added.

Norton, following the rather slight and bumptious figure up the steps, swore to himself.

These damned Whigs—they were waiting for Pitt to die!

§ VI

It was Susan who first observed him, entering the room rather diffidently, in the wake of that boy of Lady Sheen's.

Susan, Lady Hemingby, was not often out of town in these days. Nothing, not the preoccupied Hemingby, no longer now even the admonitions of her mother, interfered with her comings and goings. She had borne Hemingby two sons. That, to her mind, was a reasonably adequate provision against the failure of the direct line. Her duty thus done to her own satisfaction, she settled down to enjoy herself in her peculiar and sometimes disturbing way. She did not read Terence now. It would have been perfectly simple to

do so, but, after all, reading Terence had been little more than a palliative to the boredom of Stone. Here, in London, one need never be bored. And people—at any rate to a satiric and curious mind like Susan's—were fundamentally more amusing than books.

She was not expecting Norton. She was, actually, not expecting anybody in particular. The Trevivians' was a good house to be invited to—a house of good talk, uncommon personalities, an excellent field for observation—and having been invited, she had come. She was talking to Mrs. Trevivian when the opening door revealed Norton. Mrs. Trevivian, the distant in-law of Susan's whom Trevivian had married for her money, had long given up any attempt at managing her wayward and dynamic husband. When Pitt came back Carlos had been in the Government for a time, and that had been a good time for Mrs. Trevivian. But trouble was never far away. The Addington faction, that mournful, sly Boreland man, were worrying Carlos, trying to get him out. Mr. Pitt, too, was discouraging in his attitude. Often and often, waking in the night—the Trevivians habitually slept together—she knew by sundry intimate tokens that Carlos was lying sleepless beside her, brooding over his thwarted ambitions, his hostile colleagues, lying there calculating, wondering, making plans. She would say:

“Not asleep, dear?”

“No, dear,” he would reply.

“What is it?”

“Nothing.”

“Yes, Carlos, tell me.”

“No. It's nothing.”

That was how it always ended. Carlos Trevivian had something of the mediæval attitude towards a

woman. She could share his bed, his home, his life—but not his thoughts. . . .

Susan found Mrs. Trevivian a little dull. Women who were wrapped up in their husbands generally were dull, she found. So she dropped a small stone into the placid deeps of her companion's conversation.

"What's become of Joan Stathern?" she asked, following a momentary silence.

"Miss Stathern?" Mrs. Trevivian looked vaguely uncomfortable. "Well, we really don't know. We understood she was going abroad— Of course, that old business—you know——"

Susan nodded sagely. "I believe," she confided, *sotto voce*, "that Norton did go to her room that night."

"Oh, no—I'm sure—I don't know——" She pulled herself together. "It was all very distressing at the time," she stated with some firmness, "but it's all over now, and we have forgotten about it."

"Yes, of course." Susan gazed upwards at a large decorative candelabrum through innocent eyes. "Still, it wasn't really cleared up, was it?"

No, Mrs. Trevivian supposed it wasn't. But they had decided to think no more about it.

Susan agreed that this was quite the best plan. "Though it always seemed funny to me," she added, "that Lady Flanders collapsed so suddenly and denied everything in the way she did."

Mrs. Trevivian said, "Yes," but would be drawn no further. Susan, perceiving the look of placid obstinacy in her hostess' face, gave it up.

Over in a corner, Anne Caversham was playing operatic tunes on the pianoforte. The Trevivians' "little receptions" were always informal, desultory affairs. There was no drilling of guests. People did

and ate and said pretty well what they liked. Cards, music, flirtation, talk—you took your choice.

Susan said:

"Who brings Anne Caversham here?"

"She comes by herself." Mrs. Trevivian coughed doubtfully. "Those girls were both brought up very casually, of course. She seems rather a strange girl. I feel a little sorry for her sometimes."

Susan looked up. "Sorry? Why sorry?"

"Oh, I don't know. But—that queer household at Belgravia House—she can never have known much home life."

"Well, I did," said Susan, "and I think she's damned lucky to have missed it."

Mrs. Trevivian laughed nervously. She didn't mind Lady Hemingby saying "damned", of course. The Trevivians were both very broad, they hoped. But Lady Hemingby might have said it more quietly. She glanced around apprehensively, lest somebody else should have heard. But apparently nobody had.

"I'm surprised they let Anne come here," Susan added, when Mrs. Trevivian had regained her equanimity.

"Dear me! Why shouldn't she, indeed?"

"Well, I was always taught that Tory girls shouldn't visit at Whig houses. My mother would never let me go to Belgravia House. I should have thought the converse applied."

Mrs. Trevivian considered. "Of course, things are different now," she suggested. "We live in changing times——"

She hesitated. That last phrase sounded rather like a piece of one of Carlos' speeches. "Anne is a nice girl," she concluded, "and we like to have her."

The notes of Gluck's *Che favo* aria came to their ears through the buzz of conversation. The perfect fragment was being played with finish, delicately and surely.

Susan hummed the air to herself. "Anne plays well," she remarked.

"Do you know," she added, "it sounds odd, but I believe my mother wanted Norton to marry Anne Caversham."

Mrs. Trevivian was incredulous. "Marry into that house?"

"Yes. She had an idea that Anne would be a good woman because her mother had been such a bad one."

"Oh, not *bad*, Lady Hemingby. We must not say *bad*."

"Well, careless!"

Mrs. Trevivian tittered, then subsided again. "And nothing ever came of it?" she enquired.

"No. How could it?"

"Well, Anne is a *nice* girl."

"Yes, but she is a plain girl too. . . . You know what fools women are about my brother. He's always been able to pick the prettiest of a dozen pretty women. They've never given him a chance to think what he really liked. If he were to open the door now and come into this room. . . ."

§ VII

That, beyond all reasonable probability, was the moment Norton entered the Trevivians' drawing-room.

He glanced around, perceived his hostess, rather round-eyed and startled, and, sitting beside her, Susan. Susan was rocking with laughter. Something, clearly, had tickled her.

When the greetings, brotherly embraces, exclamations of amazement, were over, he said:

"What were you laughing at?"

"Mrs. Trevivian and I," Susan explained, "were just saying——"

"No, really, *I* had said nothing," her hostess interrupted.

"——were, just saying that if you entered the room at this minute you would soon have the prettiest women in the room around you."

He bowed. "And so I have, already."

Seating himself beside his sister, he submitted to her rapid fire of questions. Some such catechism he would have to go through with a good many people. He had expected that. And this evening, his first evening in London, he was entirely prepared for the inevitable. Susan pumped him as dry as the presence of Mrs. Trevivian would permit, and, after that lady retired, abandoned herself to an orgy of even more indiscreet questions. In the old days, there had been no secrets between Susan and her brother. But that was long ago. Orientations change with changing years. Norton soon reached the conversational point at which it was necessary to answer evasively, to affect misunderstanding, to make a smile or a shrug do service for an answer. Finally he told Susan point blank that he would tell her no more about Princess Barbarov.

"They were saying here that you left Russia out of pique," Susan remarked, quite unperturbed.

He left that opening alone.

"I told people that was rubbish," she added magnanimously.

"Quite right."

She smiled. "But why *did* you leave, Norton?"

"I've gone over all that before. I was homesick."

"M'm." Susan tapped a grey satin knee thoughtfully with her fan. "I don't remember your ever being homesick like that before."

"Well, I was this time. . . . Where did Mrs. Trevivian say Carlos had been detained?"

"At Putney."

"Not—Pitt's house?"

She nodded. "Yes. Pitt's house."

"Is he so ill?"

"We don't really know how ill he is."

He rose. "I suppose I must go round and see some of these people. . . ."

For half an hour he ranged from group to group among the company. They seemed, he thought, pre-occupied. There was an air of tension in the room. . . . Pitt, no doubt. Most of the people here to-night belonged to Pitt. So it was as bad as all that. They were actually—afraid.

He was greeted with friendliness, but without enthusiasm, with no special show of amazement that he was among them again. There was even, in one or two faces, something almost disapproving, almost disparaging. Nothing, of course, that you could be sure of, nothing to seize and hold—an imponderable, fugitive expression—as though he had lost his old footing in London, as though London had lost interest in himself.

They were pleasant, but they kept him ever so slightly at a distance. . . . He felt confused, uncomfortable, when he realised what was happening. Between their questions and his answers, both formal, he sought for reasons. Was it Austerlitz that he caught in their eyes? The belief that he had let himself be hood-

winked? There had been, he knew, tales enough around London about him and the way the Czar and his ministers were supposed to be throwing dust in his eyes. And the Barbarov episode would strengthen that belief, if any held it. It fitted in with the rest, that story about the Princess. . . . Well, let them say what they pleased.

He sauntered over to the pianoforte.

"Hello, Anne!" he said.

She regarded him with cool friendliness.

"Glad to be back in your old haunts, Lord Norton?"

"Yes. It's good to be back again."

She had stopped playing. "I saw you talking to Lady Hemingby," she said. "You two have always been great friends, haven't you?"

He laughed. "I suppose so. How did you know?"

"Georgiana. Morval told her, I expect."

"Morval? Yes, of course. I sometimes forget I'm a kinsman by marriage of yours, Anne."

"Nothing disgraceful in that, is there?"

"No, of course not. . . . What's Morval doing now?"

"Oh, he's a Whig now. I suppose you heard."

"Yes, Lady Sheen sent me all the news while I was away."

"My aunt writes good letters."

He was silent for a moment. "They were the consolation of my exile," he said, at length.

Her eyes, that were not beautiful but were full of quiet intelligence, met his own for an instant. They said, as plainly as possible: "My aunt's letters were not the only consolation of your exile." He was conscious of the criticism and glanced away. Anne Caversham had always been so damned superior and clever, even as quite a little girl. Nothing had ever surprised her, nobody

had ever witnessed the hour when she had lost her self-control. . . .

"Do you see Kathy much now?" he asked.

"Lady Sheen's Kathy? Not very much. She's married now, you see. That makes a difference."

He agreed that it did. "When are you going to marry, Anne?" he said.

She did not reply at once. Her fingers touched the keys again, playing ever so softly a simple tune that reminded him oddly of the one he and Natasha had practised in the little drawing-room of her country house, last summer.

"It takes two to make a marriage," Anne Caversham said at length.

He thought how fine her hands were, as she played—long, thin, white hands. Not necessarily aristocratic hands—he had known persons of the most lordly breeding who had had red hands with short blunt fingers. But those tapering, pale hands somehow reflected the personality of Anne Caversham herself. They were essentially calm, aloof. Nothing would surprise them.

As he pondered her last remark, the door opened.

Trevivian came in.

§ VIII

For the rest of the evening he talked to Carlos. Trevivian was inclined to be a casual host. If he wanted to devote himself to one particular guest, he did so. The others had to amuse themselves as best they might. The method, reprehensible as it was, worked well enough in his case. Everybody knew that Trevivian's slights were the outcome of his own intense preoccupations. The garment of a certain eccentricity shielded him from censure.

So, to-night, he devoted himself to Norton.

They talked and talked, sitting under a portrait of one of Mrs. Trevivian's ancestors. Trevivian, Norton thought, was tired out. The thin, ascetic face seemed paler than usual, the eyes had lost much of their old fire. He was, he admitted, a worried man. He did not see what was to become of England. The future was full of hazard. We were losing ground—in Europe, all over the world. Bonaparte had undermined our prestige. We had set out to crush him and we had failed. The Whigs would come back, and they would give way on all sides, make terms with sedition, shake hands with anarchy and usurpation. England seemed to be finished. . . .

Almost at once, directly the first greetings were over, Norton had said :

"You have come from Pitt's?"

"Yes—this minute."

"How is he?"

Carlos had hesitated. An infinite weariness seemed to fall upon his already jaded figure.

"I don't expect to see Pitt again," he answered at last.

The quiet statement, unadorned, ushered in by no sort of preliminaries, was like a thunder-clap.

Norton frowned, then smiled nervously. "You're joking."

"Do you think I'd joke about that?"

"No, of course not. But——"

"He's dying, Norton, dying!"

They were silent.

"But he's only forty-six," Norton protested.

"I know."

"But—what's the matter with him—at that age?"

"Senile decay, Farquhar says."

"You mean—he's worn himself out?"

"Just that."

Norton pondered. "Do you believe it?"

"No, I don't. I think it's a fancy tale got up by the doctors to cover their damned ignorance."

Somebody came up to ask Trevivian the question that was in all their minds.

"About the same," he replied. "As well as can be expected."

When the enquirer had gone away again he muttered:

"Look at them all. Like lost sheep. . . . What'll they do if he dies—*when* he dies, I mean? Who will lead the party?"

"Not Addington," Norton said grimly.

"No, by God, not Addington!"

"Boreland?"

"Who would follow Boreland?"

Norton touched his friend lightly on the arm.

"You then, Carlos?"

Trevivian looked up from his glowering inspection of the drawing-room carpet. There was a certain wistfulness in his face.

"Me?" he said. "An upstart? A man of no special family, with foreign blood in his veins?" He shook his head. "It's no good. They don't trust me. Even now, they don't trust me."

"Pitt himself," he added, "didn't trust me."

"But if there is nobody else?"

A slow smile curved Trevivian's lips. Something of the old fire, the old confident ambition, lit up his eyes.

"Yes." He nodded thoughtfully. "If there is nobody else. . . ."

§ IX

Pitt died. London saw what it had not seen for many years, a Whig Ministry at Westminster. Not, however, exclusively Whig. The Whigs were by way of being an army of officers without men. New blood, even contaminated Tory blood, had to be sought. Finally, the terms of the *mariage de convenance* were announced to the world: Addington was to have a place in the Cabinet. Of course, Addington was a Tory. There was no getting round that fact. And he was not merely a Tory, but a Tory of the blind last-ditch type. A man like Trevivian might have been expected to lend himself to such an alliance—Trevivian, half idealist, half soldier of fortune. But Addington!—it was, men felt, a disgraceful affair.

Still, as the Whigs pointed out, it was Addington or Opposition. He had a solid band of supporters behind him—forty votes, dependable, he carried. And the King liked him. What was the sacrifice of a principle, the quiet demolition of a hitherto ostentatiously vaunted idol, beside the joy of seeing the Tories on the wrong side of the House?

Norton watched it all, tried to take his old vivid interest in what was going on, and found himself failing. Petersburg had spoiled him for politics. He would have liked Trevivian to attain the summit of his ambitions, but that was because he was fond of Trevivian. He had been overwhelmed when at last the definite news came of Pitt's death, for he had been taught from boyhood to regard Mr. Pitt as a dear master, and that habit of mind had grown to be one of the fundamentals of his life. Then, at the thought of the Whigs coming back, he was filled with distaste. Mourakin and his friends

had forced him to listen to more pretentious nonsense in the last year than he found it agreeable to look back upon. And now the English counterparts of Mourakin were taking office.

Still, these considerations, *au fond*, were all personal ones. He could not recapture the partisan spirit of the days of "Pitt's young men". When, socially, he mingled with politicians, they bored him, and perhaps he allowed them to see it. On every hand; now, people whose interests lay round Westminster made it plain to him that he no longer counted. Whether it was Petersburg that had done this he had no means of finding out, and he never troubled to obtain means.

At the beginning of March he left London. . . .

Something, he hardly knew what, kept him away from London for a long time. He did not originally mean to be away for long. In the first place he had only intended a short visit to Stone. But the visit to Stone developed into a round of family visits. He saw Charlotte and Charlotte's Duke, investigated his young Hemingby nephews, even made the voyage across the Irish Sea to call upon Augusta. He wondered at himself, for his family affections were far from deep, and he derived little pleasure from the encounters. A dozen times he was on the point of telling Sacks to pack for London. But always he forbore to give that order—or, if he gave it, he cancelled it almost at once. Restlessness, an obscure *malaise* that he could not account for, drove him from place to place, from hearth to hearth. And always, at the back of his uneasiness, lay that disinclination to go back to London.

Coming home from Russia, he had looked forward to London so fervently, with so keen a zest. And not only to London but to his old way of life. It was discourag-

ing, bewildering, to find that London did not especially need him and that he no longer needed his old way of life.

Impossible, of course, to convey anything of this to Goward, to Charlotte. Even had he been articulate, these kinsfolk were not the people who could enter into the subterranean difficulties of his soul.

Goward, in solitary grandeur at Stone (Countess being in town), wanted to talk diplomacy. In particular, Goward wanted to talk about his own diplomacy, about Paris in the dangerous days of '91 and the way he had "stuck to his guns". The phrase cropped up a good deal in his talk. It evidently pleased the mature and settled county magnate, that picture from his glorious youth—of himself sticking to those guns. Norton was reminded of certain paintings of military people, in which the subjects were depicted in heroic attitudes, with drawn swords and cloaks floating out behind, against a lurid background of smoke and lightning-flashes. He smiled to himself, thinking things over afterwards in his bedroom. But it didn't escape him that Goward, too, considered him something of a failure. Goward would have stayed at Petersburg. He would not have allowed personal considerations to turn him from his plain duty.

In the bedroom, with the familiar park outstretched beyond the windows, there almost seemed to be some justice in Goward's view.

"Duty. . . ."

The word slipped involuntarily from his lips as he stood there, looking out over the moonlit acres of the park. . . . Duty. The duty to his country. After all, he had negotiated the treaty. He had the details at his fingers' ends. He ought to have stayed when things went wrong!

Excuses presented themselves. He had asked for his recall long before things began to go wrong. And it was only a temporary mission. That had been quite understood at the start. . . . Still, it was undeniable that he had asked to be recalled directly he had grown tired of his post. That was what it amounted to. He had been entertained by the novelty of his position at first. In spite of a thousand disadvantages, the consciousness of responsibility had braced him. Then, boredom settled down. He began to yearn for the old, the absent delights of home. . . . Very largely, he perceived now, because they were absent—for no more solid reason than that.

Well, it was over. He would not be asked to go back, as things were now. His problem, until his life took on some semblance of routine again, was to amuse himself.

From Stone he went on to visit Charlotte; listened to Charlotte's maternal anecdotage; played tennis with Charlotte's Duke; even began an affair with the young wife of a baronet, a neighbour of Charlotte's. Then, quite abruptly, it all ceased to interest him. Charlotte's conversation became intolerable, her husband's play a mere pat-ball, her neighbour's wife a pretty, empty-headed fool. He rode away, one morning. That afternoon the neighbour's wife would be in a secluded summerhouse at the end of her long garden. He had promised to be there. She would wait and wait and he wouldn't come. . . .

He felt he didn't care. Let her go back to her room and have a good cry into her pillow. He had done her no harm—it was only himself he had harmed. And another smirch would make very little difference to him.

From his family he extended the scope of his wander-

ings to include Mr. Wakefield, once Rector of Nelles-thorpe. It wasn't difficult to find him, and not too troublesome to make contact with him when found. Middle age had not seriously undermined Mr. Wakefield. He was married and well off. It was no longer necessary for him to coach pupils in order to enjoy the small luxuries he demanded of life. As for preferment, that would come through his wife, Lady Elizabeth, in God's good time. All he had to do was to manage his parish nicely and wait his turn.

Meanwhile he had his books and his philosophy.

They discussed many things, sitting in the rectory garden after dinner on the evening of Norton's descent upon the quiet parish. It was very hot. Even the approach of night seemed hardly to cool the air. The trees hung listless. In the middle distance the swollen harvest moon climbed the rich sky behind a row of poplars. Through the lit window of a ground-floor room Lady Elizabeth could be seen writing.

"I have sometimes wondered, Lord Norton," Mr. Wakefield said, following a thoughtful hiatus in the conversation, "why you didn't marry long ago."

He glanced across at the bulky figure of his quondam pupil, lounging in a garden chair and regarding the rising moon with a kind of sulky, arrogant indifference. Mr. Wakefield knew that look of old. He perceived that no radical change had taken place in the composition of the younger Fitzwarren.

Without turning his head, Norton replied:

"I've never found a woman I wanted to marry.

"Not a woman who was free to marry," he added.

Mr. Wakefield understood that. He had followed the fortunes of all his pupils in an unostentatious fashion, and he knew about Lady Sheen.

"All the same," he said, "I do not think you will find contentment until you do marry."

"So you think I'm discontented?"

"I have not the slightest doubt of it."

"I see." Mr. Wakefield's guest shifted the position of his long limbs in the unyielding garden chair. "I suppose you're right," he conceded. "Though I don't know why I should not be contented."

"The usual reason, Lord Norton—you want something out of reach."

"What, I wonder."

But Mr. Wakefield declined the role of soothsayer. "How should I know? I haven't seen you, remember, for about fifteen years. . . . Still, in the hour or two we have talked together here to-night, I have learnt several things, perhaps. You find yourself, I take it, without desire for all the things that used to attract you. For example, London—the world of London?"

"Yes. I feel I never want to see London again."

"And—women?"

A pause. "I ran away from the last—I was bored."

"Exactly. At thirty-two and at twenty-two a man has widely differing objects of desire. What you want now isn't the brilliance of the London world. It isn't the excitement of an affair with a woman. You had all that when you were twenty-two. You have grown out of it."

Mr. Wakefield came to a halt there. He did not wish to presume upon his old relationship with Norton. They were, after all, comparative strangers now, and as a mere country parson he could not go too far. Still, he resolved upon a slight further advance.

"Think it over," he said, "and then seek out the prettiest heiress you know and marry her."

Norton yawned tolerantly. "You are worldly, Mr. Wakefield."

"But I am right."

"Not quite right. . . . I am not going to seek out a pretty heiress."

"Very well. The beauty without the money, if you like."

"Not even that."

Across the lawn Lady Elizabeth advanced towards them, a large, good-humoured figure picking a cautious way in the dusk, for fear of frogs.

"Whatever are you two men talking about so long?" she demanded archly.

"Old times, my dear," her husband replied.

"Ah, yes, indeed! What a great deal has happened since then, to be sure! You must come and see us again, Lord Norton, now that you have begun."

Norton, who had risen at her approach, declared himself charmed to comply.

"There was something I was going to ask you," his hostess continued. "I thought of it while I was in there writing. I said to myself, 'Now, I'll ask Lord Norton about that.' And now upon my soul, I've quite forgotten it."

She made an effort of concentration, gazing fixedly at the grass about her feet. Unhappily, a small frog chose that moment to take a vigorous jump in the direction of the lily-pond. He crossed Lady Elizabeth's line of vision, as she stood concentrating, drawing from her an involuntary shriek.

"What is it, my dear?" Mr. Wakefield enquired calmly. "One of those frogs again?"

"Yes, one of those frogs again."

"I'll tell the gardener," he promised, "that they must be got rid of somehow."

They moved off, Lady Elizabeth keeping a wary eye on the ground.

"It was just coming," she lamented, as they reached the front door.

"What was, my dear? The frog?"

"No, no—the question I was going to ask Lord Norton. It was just coming into my head—I could feel it groping its way in, so to speak, when that nasty thing frightened it away again."

"It will return later," Norton suggested politely.

"I hope so. And I shan't let you go away until it does return!"

They went to bed. At breakfast next morning Lady Elizabeth Wakefield appeared flourishing a small piece of paper.

"Well," she announced with gusto, "it came!"

The two men looked at her doubtfully, as though by chance she might have given birth to something in the night watches.

"Ah, it came after all, did it?" Mr. Wakefield observed at length.

"Yes, and I wrote it down directly. I got out of bed and went over to my table and wrote it down there and then on a slip of paper.

"Lord Norton," she demanded, handing him the paper, "do you know this name?"

Her guest took the white slip, smiling, and glanced down to read it. Then, surprisingly, a slow flush coloured his face, and for a moment he looked almost offended. At length he said:

"Yes, I know Princess Natalya Chirsky quite well."

"There now! She and I were great friends for about a fortnight once, when we were girls and the Princess was in Rome with her mother. Of course I was older than Natalya. . . . I knew you had just come from Russia and so I thought I would ask you about her."

Mr. Wakefield perceived that Norton was satisfied—the offended look had vanished from his face. Lady Elizabeth's boisterous naïveté was, of course, above suspicion. All the same, it had been rather odd, that flush and that air of resentment. Possibly they had stumbled upon one of Norton's Russian *affaires*—for, doubtless, there had been *affaires* in Petersburg as elsewhere. And there was certainly a kind of veiled reluctance in the way Norton was answering Lady Elizabeth's questions.

"Is she very beautiful now?" his wife was enquiring.

"She is supposed to be a very beautiful woman."

"But you *know*. You have seen her."

"Yes. I met her frequently. She is certainly very charming."

"You met at her mother's, I suppose?"

"No. Her mother is dead. Natalya is Princess Barbarov now."

Mr. Wakefield pricked up his ears. Norton had called the Russian woman Natalya, quite casually, as though he knew her even better than he had admitted.

"Those Russian marriages in high life," he interposed, "are mostly *de convenance*, are they not?"

Norton agreed. "This one was."

"But how dreadful," Lady Elizabeth mourned, "for poor little Natalya! A loveless marriage!"

She looked tenderly across the white cloth at her husband, who she really believed had married her for love.

"And is she unhappy, Lord Norton?" she asked tremulously.

"Not very happy, I believe. They do not live together."

"Dear, dear! An unprotected woman—— Tell me, has she—admirers?"

"Rumour says so."

"Dear, dear!"

Lady Elizabeth was plainly, if temporarily, upset. Her day seemed to be spoiled.

"And just fancy," she moaned, "your knowing her so well! So very strange. . . ."

Silence settled down upon them. Each appeared to be absorbed in private thoughts, Norton perhaps most deeply of all. The clerk in holy orders was the first to recover himself.

"What about a day's shooting, Lord Norton?" he said.

His guest looked up. The celebrated eyes seemed queerly happy, happier than they had been since his arrival.

Lady Elizabeth noticed it.

"There now," she exclaimed, "it's as I always say. You never see an Englishman looking really pleased unless he's going out to shoot something!"

Mr. Wakefield smiled ambiguously. He, too, had observed the sudden change in Norton's manner, but he found himself unable to accept his wife's facile explanation. He was puzzled. All that day, shooting Bottle's Wood, he considered the matter—deeply, from various angles, in all its aspects. But he arrived at no conclusion, except that, apparently, it was something to do with the Russian woman—the Princess—Barbarov, or some such name. . . .

Even on the following morning, when his guest departed, Mr. Wakefield was still doubtful as to the precise nature of what had taken place in the mind of Lord Norton Fitzwarren at breakfast the day before.

§ x

In other circumstances Norton himself might have entertained similar doubts, for his own mental processes did not greatly interest him. But the revelation that had come to him during Lady Elizabeth Wakefield's matutinal catechism was too striking and went too deep to be ignored.

This revelation, quite simply, was that he loved Natalya!

He pondered for a long time over it. He had loved so many women in so many ways. . . . Little dirtyish escapades on warm London afternoons, ephemeral affairs of boudoirs, sofas, cushions, the sun-drenched square of a curtained window. . . . Or Henrietta Sheen, whose devotion had formed his mind—formed, at any rate, the best part of it. . . . Both kinds of relationship were love. He had known them both and many others besides. And it became increasingly clear to him that what he felt for Natalya came into no category he had ever yet experienced.

He wanted her, not for a dozen idle summer afternoons, not even as a dear friend. He wanted her for the rest of both their lives, as a wife, as a lover, as the companion who should go step by step with him unto the end. . . .

All so simple, so commonplace. He ought to have known, a year ago, that evening in her country house, how it was with him. But he had been afraid. Marriage had always been something to avoid, a thing

incautious men got trapped into. That was the fixed idea, the clot, that had upset the true play of his instincts. And now, suddenly, the clot was dissipated; his mind had clarified in a way that almost frightened him; the restlessness that had plagued him ever since his return to England was over.

All so simple. . . . He would write to her at once. Strange, he had not heard from her, though she had promised to write. Now, thinking everything over, he saw that the absence of those letters had been an irritation, a food to his restlessness. But he had kept the knowledge from himself. . . . Well, that was all over. He would write to-morrow.

To-morrow. To-morrow he would be in London. The carriage, at long last, was heading for Great Stanhope Street. He would write from there, his London home, asking her to marry him. . . .

His mind paused at that. The carriage was comfortable, a well-sprung carriage, typical of England, the quality and excellence and finish of English life. *She* would ride in this carriage, or in one like it, along these roads, through this perfect countryside. They would be coming home, perhaps, from a visit to Stone—coming home to Great Stanhope Street. He would listen to her grave, penetrating comments on his relations. They would be alone, with much to tell one another.

He would work for her, too, rise high in the world for her sake. She should be, before he died, an English peeress—a Marchioness, perhaps even a Duchess, which, God knew, was a prouder thing than being a Russian Princess. He and Trevivian together—they would fight their way up side by side. There would be honour, honours, power, a great name—all for her glory.

Unconsciously, he began to whistle an air that had come into his mind, an air delicate and high-bred, like herself. . . . What was its name? Ah, of course, that thing Anne Caversham had played at Trevivian's—that *Che faro* tune. . . . What shall I do without my Eurydice? He smiled to himself. *His* Eurydice was not lost to him. He had had his Hades of perplexities, but at last he had found her. And now—now he would never let her go!

That evening, quite late, he reached Great Stanhope Street.

CHAPTER V

THE WHITE MARBLE DIANA

§ I

SOCIETY was not visibly amazed at the sudden return of Lord Norton Fitzwarren to London, at a time of the year when most people had departed to their country houses. He was regarded as a man who had not deserved particularly well of the Government which had sent him to Petersburg, and who was therefore not likely to be employed again. Public opinion, loose, ill-informed, judging only by superficial causes and effects, was more than half inclined to lay the blame for Austerlitz upon his notorious susceptibility. So far, however, as they considered the probable reasons for his return to London at all, they attributed it to political motives. The Westminster scene was changing again, and Norton was supposed to be a candidate for spoil.

Charles Fox, that autumn, followed Pitt to the Abbey. Quietly, side by side now, they would lie for ever, who in their lifetime had fought so long and so bitterly. His death robbed the Whigs of their sole excuse for presuming to undertake the Government. They would cling to office, it was supposed, until something came along to turn them out. That contingency, though, could not be far to seek.

Power sobers democrats. They have to throw overboard their principles and their theories, one by one, as practical necessity dictates. It is, indeed, extraordinary how easily they do it, when the pinch comes.

The compromise with reality is not so distasteful, after all, as the prospect of defeat.

It took six months to turn the Whigs out. They continued the War, feebly, incompetently, sending petty expeditions here and there, keeping back the Russian subsidies and the relief force for Prussia, doing anything rather than concentrate on a definite military policy. Among other things they sent Lord Morval on a mission to the King of Prussia, Morval being a Whig now and a fit person, in view of his important family connections, to be placated with official employment. But things went dreadfully wrong with Morval's mission. By the time he reached the King, the Prussian armies had been routed by Lannes, Prussia was overrun with Frenchmen, and Napoleon had made his public entry into Berlin. Morval and his staff of four found themselves stranded, without a conveyance—retreating Prussians had taken all the carriages—and in imminent danger of being captured by the French.

The tale amused, for quite a while, that section of London which knew Morval. The idea of his serious, pedantic person being harried over bog and cliff, torn by brambles, devoured by hunger and gnats, indignant, protesting, impotent. . . . It was really too funny. And when Morval himself reappeared in town, with a scar on his forehead, the picture was felt to be complete. The scar, it turned out, was a genuine product of the battle-field, but Morval had got it running away. Climbing down a rocky place, his foot had slipped. . . . Still, he bore himself with dignity. He had emerged from family life into the blaze of public attention, and, of course, it had not turned out too well. He had had poor luck. But he had done his best.

People were grateful to him. In a sinister world,

where the Corsican's long shadow lay darkly over everything that was stable and friendly, the episode of Morval was not to be despised. They laughed at him, but they did not like him the less. When he walked along Piccadilly now he could not help noticing how many more people stopped to pass the time of day with him than had ever been the case before his Prussian journey.

Walking thus one morning in the winter of 1806, on his way to Belgravia House, he met Norton, strolling with Trevivian. He was not especially pleased to meet them. Norton had always been inclined to treat him as a butt, and with Trevivian Morval was not too sure of his ground now that he himself had seceded from the Tory fold.

Norton saw him first.

"Why, here's my nephew!" he exclaimed.

He affected to examine Morval's brow. "How is the wound?" he enquired gravely.

Morval did not rise. "You two looked conspiratorial," he observed.

"Yes, we were plotting your overthrow."

"Mine?"

"You and your new friends."

Morval remarked that threatened men lived long. Though for his part, he had given up politics.

Trevivian said: "What, again?"

"He's going into the Army," Norton suggested.

"Really, Norton!"

"No, seriously. With your military experience——"

"Well, damn it, Norton, you didn't exactly cover yourself with glory, did you?"

They both looked at him. The unexpected outburst demanded serious consideration.

"You're quite right," Trevivian said. "He ran away, too. Only he's got longer legs. . . ."

"We're going to give Norton another chance, though," he added.

Morval pricked up his ears. "Another chance?"

"Yes. When we kick you Whigs out——"

"When," interpolated Morval boldly.

"Yes, when we do, we're going to recall the man you've got at Petersburg now. Norton here isn't much good, but he couldn't be worse than the present man."

"You're really thinking of going back?" Morval eyed his relative mistrustfully. "I should say it would be a difficult mission now."

"If they ask me," Norton said, "I shall go."

Morval thought he looked tired and rather worried beneath his bantering exterior. Scraps of intelligence had reached the Morval household about the affair Norton was supposed to have had in Petersburg. There seemed to be some mystery about it. Susan, only the other day, had been declaring that, in her opinion, Norton had wanted to marry this Princess woman, and that he had been refused. Of course, the Princess woman was said to be married already. But supposing she was, and Norton wanted to go to Russia to see her, he needn't wait to be appointed Ambassador before he did it. . . . It was all very complicated, and Morval had little patience with complication. Life had always been simple to him, and he looked upon other people's muddles as largely the result of carelessness and lack of system. In any case, Norton's love affairs, thank God, were no business of his.

"When," he ironically demanded of Trevivian, "do you expect to take office?"

"As soon as we can get rid of your friends, of course."

"Of course. But when will that be?"

Trevivian gazed thoughtfully, through half-closed eyes, at a window across the street.

"Let me see," he mused. "December, January—February. . . Shall we say March?"

They smiled good humouredly as at a jest, and Norton made some flippant allusion to Ides. . . .

When Morval had left them, Norton said:

"Did you really mean that?"

"What? About coming back to office in March?"

"Yes. You spoke almost as if you meant it."

Trevivian laughed shortly. "I meant it when I said it," he replied.

"And—you still do?"

A shrug was the only reply. To Carlos Trevivian the fall of the Government was too near his heart to be spoken of lightly.

Norton understood. He knew how many offers Carlos had had from the Whigs, and that he had refused them all. But he was aware, too, that there had been hesitations. More than once Trevivian had seemed to be afloat on his Rubicon. A vigorous push might have sent him over to the other side. So far, however, nobody had given that push. And now Carlos, watching the signs, was definitely waiting for the Whigs to fall. When they did——

An open carriage passed, modest, uncoroneted, but well turned out.

Norton swung round.

"Did you see that carriage?" he said.

No, Carlos had noticed nothing.

"I could have sworn that was Joan Stathern inside."

"But she's supposed to be abroad."

A pause, silent and vaguely uncomfortable. Then Norton said:

"Yes. . . . I must have been mistaken."

The subject was allowed to drop. There was still a residuum of soreness remaining in the Trevivians' minds on the question of Norton and Joan Stathern.

A moment later, at the corner of St. James's Street, they separated.

"You want a change, Norton," Trevivian said.

"Why do you think that?"

"You're looking tired."

Norton smiled tolerantly. "I lead such an idle life, you see."

"It isn't that." Trevivian gazed in an impersonal fashion down the slope of St. James's Street. "You're worried about something. What's the matter?"

"There's nothing the matter."

Norton's tone had become sulky, resentful. It intimated plainly enough that if a man had private affairs that made him look tired and worried that was his own business. Trevivian trespassed no farther. . . .

On his way home he was passed by a plain yet elegant open carriage. Some whim of chance caused him to look at it with more than ordinary attention, and, as he did so, the occupant—a solitary lady—turned and smiled at him. Then, in a minute, she was gone out of sight round a corner.

Trevivian frowned. . . . That woman—keeping her own carriage now, and back in England. So it *had* been Joan Stathern in Piccadilly this morning!

He considered the implications of Joan Stathern for a few moments, then put her gently from his mind. After all, she had had bad luck. Norton, in all

probability, had treated her damnably. But in any case she did not matter now.

Later, dressing for dinner, he remembered her again, this time in connection with the idea of Norton's private worries, that he would not tell. Trevivian knew as much as most people what those worries were. He knew, that is, that they were to do with a Princess Barbarov. Incredible as it seemed, Norton was supposed to have been swept away by this Russian Princess. . . . He had been made to taste his own medicine, people said. . . . Of course, it was all conjecture. As a general rule, though, there was no smoke without fire. . . .

Fire——

Trevivian, tying his cravat, smiled a dark grim smile.

Fire indeed—fire of passion, of retribution, smouldering jealousy, gridiron of indecision. . . . That Stathern woman must have known all that, poor creature. And now she had come through at the other end, calm, smiling, with her own carriage. It was Norton's turn now.

He surveyed the cravat. It would do. It did not look like Norton's, but then, Norton had Sacks, and almost any clothes looked well on Norton's person. . . . That magnificent, conquering presence, faced now, if gossip were anywhere near true, with defeat. An odd idea—for the idea of poetic retributive justice is always odd, in spite of a thousand instances—that Norton should suffer for all that he had made others suffer. Lotharios, as a rule, began their sufferings in Hades. The women they had injured never had the pleasure of witnessing their own revenge. But really, Norton wasn't a Lothario. He wasn't just a cold-hearted sensualist. . . . Sometimes, it was true, in the past he did cer-

tainly seem to behave like one. And now he was paying a foolish price for having had his own way. . . . Indecision, uncertainty, suspicion, heartache—Trevivian knew what those were like to rise with in the morning, to lie with at night, to drag around, up and down the streets, all day.

In the glass, the grim dark smile faded from his face. After all, it was Norton—his friend. . . .

§ II

Norton, sauntering back to Great Stanhope Street in the pale and fugitive winter sunshine, was conscious of inward gloom, penetrating, unrelieved, filling his horizon.

So long ago it seemed that he had come home to London, after that restless, unhappy sojourn among his relatives, that sojourn that had culminated at Lady Elizabeth Wakefield's breakfast-table, the day he went shooting with his old tutor. Then, he had known the glory of renaissance. The clean wind of a new hope, a new promise in his life, had blown through him—a wind in which banners had waved proudly, like the flags that an explorer plants in the soil of some hitherto undiscovered land. That land had been so near then. All that he had to do, it seemed, was to ask Natalya to marry him. She would write back, tenderly, giving herself to him. And then, when her divorce had gone through, he would go out to Russia and bring her back with him. The new life, the kingdom, the power and the glory of it, would have begun. . . .

That was six months ago.

Well, he had written to her. Letters, of course, were not his best recommendation. He had never been able to put himself on paper. And perhaps his letter to her

had been a shade formal, lacking in passion, lacking even in conviction. She may have received a bad impression from it, an impression that he was proposing a *mariage de convenance*. Or else perhaps that he thought he had only to whistle and she would come. . . . Though, thinking it over, that had, in fact, been his first view of the matter. Now, looking back, it seemed risible, an unbelievable piece of self-deception.

She had replied evasively, telling him about what was going on in Petersburg, who had married, who was dead. "Mourakin and the others come just as usual," she wrote. . . Mourakin—he had almost forgotten the fellow. And Mourakin was still coming "just as usual" to the salon by the Taurid Gardens. . . .

This morning, no less than on the day when he had received that letter, he was aware of vague homicidal intentions towards Mourakin. Jealousy, that he had never known before, gnawed at the roots of his being. In the night he had several times awakened from dreams in which his fingers were at Mourakin's throat. . . . A long while now, all this had been going on.

No wonder Trevivian said he looked worried.

At first, Natalya's letter had half-stunned him. He came to a decision to put the thought of her out of his mind. Then, next day, he sat down to reply to her letter. Perhaps his bewilderment at the overturning of his new world crept into his writing, stronger at the moment than his ingrained epistolary prejudices. For her reply was almost encouraging and full of gentle reminders of their happy friendship. At the worst she was sorry for him, at best she was telling him, in her own way, that she loved him. He did not know.

And that, after all, was the case now. Other letters had passed. And still—he did not know. . . .

Something kept him in England. Again and again he determined to go back to Petersburg to see her, to find out from her lips, and in her eyes, how things were between him and her. But so far he had not gone. The next letter might set the world right. Perhaps he ought to leave her to come to her own decision. If he made that sudden journey she would think he had come to take her by storm. Her defences would be up in a moment. He must take care, whatever happened, not to alarm her pride.

From Willy, at the Petersburg Embassy, one or two letters came, about this time. They were breezy affairs, and in other circumstances they would have amused him, but now he only searched them for references to Natalya. He could not *ask* Willy to tell him about her. That was definitely outside the pale. So he had to be content with scraps.

"Princess Barbarov," Willy wrote, "is seen about very little nowadays. There are no signs of a divorce, I gather. But as I am not one of the elect who are invited to her house, I cannot tell you very much in that quarter." And then he swerved hurriedly, as though glad to leave the topic, and took refuge in more general subjects: "Shoals of English are arriving, God knows why. They bore me to death, but your august successor encourages them. The funny part is that English people are no longer popular over here. Czar-toryski has gone or is going, and the new man is supposed to be pro-French. We are cold-shouldered, lied to, temporized with. A working alliance, so far as I can see, is past praying for. . . ."

Lady Sheen's conversation, too, was unsympathetic, on the subject of Natalya. She made it very plain that she hated the idea of Norton marrying anybody, and

hated, most of all, that he should marry a foreign woman, a stranger who would inevitably draw him out of the circle of his own friends. He listened to a long harangue at Cavendish Square—on the marriage vow, and how a divorce was no better than a liaison. "I have no patience with women who will risk nothing," she exclaimed.

He asked her, dully, what she meant by that.

"Well," she considered, "some women, like your Princess, get their marriages officially annulled. . . . Others do without that—they snatch what they can of the beauty of life, as it passes, without a thought of prudence or self-interest. They risk all the penalties of adultery—social ostracism, the loss of their place in the sun——"

She tailed off, a little break coming suddenly in her voice. Then, after a moment, she resumed:

"If *she* had done that for you, I might have been able to take more interest. But as it is. . . ."

He had risen, had taken her hand, a little sadly and gone away.

Henrietta Sheen was the only person in whom he had confided. She, he knew, would not betray him. So far as the rest of the world were concerned he maintained, to the best of his ability, his old manner. There still remained plenty of houses at which he was *persona grata*, but in the course of his social round there was no resting-place, except Cavendish Square, where he could unburden his soul. And even at Cavendish Square that had become impossible. . . .

Letting himself in at Great Stanhope Street, after his morning stroll with Trevivian, he went to his study and picked up a book. He was not one of those men to whom a fire, an armchair and a book represent the

quintessence of human contentment, but there were times, especially of late, when he had come to feel the steadfast friendliness of books, their loyalty in the hour of tribulation. And to-day his warm study, and the brown-covered book of essays he had bought second-hand yesterday because it looked curious, were blessed symbols of sanctuary to him.

He settled himself in the chair and opened the book. A phrase, almost at once, caught his eye:

"Those men and women to whom Providence has allotted the leisure for passions. . . ."

His mind came to rest upon that, clung to it, worried it. . . . The leisure for passions. . . . There was a subtle sting in the words. These affairs of the heart, then, these magnificent abandonments of the world for love's sake, were part of the privilege accorded to wealth and leisure. It was an aspect of the matter that had never occurred to him. Outside his narrow social sphere, there were "the others". They were clerks, farmers, corn-chandlers, labourers, servants. They worked hard. Love, if it came to them at all, came simply, and was metamorphosed at once into the state of marriage. . . . So that his heartache, his misery, were luxuries, unimportant accessories, like his silk shirts and his dress sword. They were not fundamental, they did not, in the sum total of life, matter very much.

A coal fell on to the hearth. He stooped and picked it up, throwing it back on to the fire. . . . Damn! The thing had been hotter than he thought. There were white marks on his finger and thumb. And, after all, he needn't have done it. He could have used the tongs. . . . His mind played for a moment with the shadowy analogy between his burnt fingers and his

perplexed heart, then gave it up. Besides, however right the damned essay-writer might be with regard to the love-affairs of his *ancien régime*, there the matter ended. With the whole force of his being, brooding there over the fire, he flung back the taunt that his love for Natasha was a mere luxury, an accident of privilege, an experience he would never have had if he had been born the son of a country shopkeeper. After all, it was marriage he wanted, the desire for one woman only, for a comradeship that should last until the end.

He wanted her, that exotic Russian Princess, as some farmer's lad wants the rector's little housemaid!

§ III

The Whigs hung on, hoping that something good might turn up to go to the country on. But nothing did turn up, and in the earliest days of spring the expected came to pass. The Whigs subsided gracefully upon the familiar benches of Opposition, and the Tory tide flowed in. On the crest of the wave rode Carlos Trevivian. The dark, eager young man of Peckwater days became Foreign Secretary in the new Government. His hungry ambition, for the time at least, was sated.

And, about a fortnight later, the appointment of Lord Norton Fitzwarren as Ambassador to the Court of Petersburg was duly gazetted.

§ IV

The official announcement was, naturally, all the outside world knew about the matter, and its most usual comment upon it was a shrug. Trevivian and Fitzwarren were hand in glove, of course. And now

that Trevivian at length had power in his grasp, what more likely than that he should do *something*, at all events, for his old friend? But Russia—at a time like this? They shrugged. Fitzwarren had failed before in Russia. . . .

Norton received the offer at a ball Countess was giving at Whitehall. The old town house, that had borne itself very quietly for years, was blossoming into many gaieties again under the ministrations of Goward and his wife. Goward was not unhopeful of a place in the Cabinet sooner or later. His rank and influence, he considered, to say nothing of the faithful service he had rendered the party, entitled him to it. It was all very well giving important places to upstarts like Trevivian if they were men of genius. You might secretly dislike men of genius but you had to give way to them. There were always places, though, that a great landowner could fill very creditably—not the first places, perhaps, but carrying none the less a pleasant accompaniment of patronage and prestige.

Countess did not endorse these hopes on her husband's part. Even she, however, thought that judicious hospitality might reasonably be expected to bring about a step in the peerage. It would be rather enjoyable, for a while at least, to be a Duchess and to be addressed as "Your Grace"—provided, of course, one had not to make any special effort to achieve it.

On this particular occasion, she stood as usual beside Goward, receiving her guests, formally, with dignity, in the manner she knew he liked. There was no casualness, none of the Trevivian-reception atmosphere, about any entertainment that Goward gave. Trevivian himself, however, was expected to be present to-night, together with the rest of the Government.

It was a full-dress political manifestation, a flaunting of power, a calculated exhibition of solidarity. . . .

One of the earliest to arrive was Norton. She greeted him warmly—he looked as if he needed it.

"You don't come and see us half often enough," she said.

He smiled. The careless insolence, in these days, had almost left his smiling eyes. "I'm so busy," he murmured.

"You know that's not true, Norton."

"Yes. But what was I to say?"

"Say the truth."

He looked comically serious. "Well then—I stay at home all day and enjoy an idle life. That would be nearer the truth, I suppose."

"You don't look as if you enjoyed anything very much," she said.

"We all grow older."

She shook her head reproachfully at him. "You are being obstinate, Norton."

"No. I am settling down to a comfortable and apathetic middle age."

Goward, who had been temporarily out of the room giving orders, joined them.

"Well, Norton," he opened, heavily, "we meet under happy auspices."

Norton agreed vaguely that they did.

"We have been wondering about you," Goward proceeded. "We have been expecting to hear some announcement now that Trevivian is, so to speak, in the saddle."

"He'll be here to-night," Countess added.

"I may get Washington," Norton said. "I hear the man there wants to leave."

They looked at him in silence, uncertain, from his tone, whether or not he were serious. Washington, America, the land of Presidents and Red Indians, the place nobody knew—surely Norton must be jesting.

“But nobody considerable ever goes to Washington,” Goward objected at last.

“I know.”

“But——”, Goward suddenly perceived the implications of his brother’s words, pondered them, then drew himself up. “Nobody in your family, young man,” he said, with a sharp glance, “was ever considerable!”

Countess made a little grimace, under cover of her fan, at Norton. The arrival of more guests effectually finished the conversation, and Norton walked away to speak to someone he knew at the far end of the room.

When the new guests had been satisfactorily greeted and disposed of, Countess said:

“I feel sorry for Norton.”

“I don’t know why we should be sorry for him,” her husband replied.

“Well, he seems so despondent.”

“And whose fault,” Goward enquired, “is that?”

She looked almost grave. “I wish I knew,” she said.

He was proceeding to enlighten her when Trevivian was announced. Goward’s manner with Trevivian, Countess thought, was worth watching. He seemed determined to keep the upstart in his place and at the same time to fawn upon the Cabinet Minister.

“We are to be here in force to-night, I hope,” he remarked with a smirk.

Trevivian seemed distrait. The nuances of his host’s manner were quite lost upon him. “We?” he queried doubtfully.

"The Government."

"Ah, yes, of course—the Government." He glanced around. "Is Norton to be here to-night?"

"He has come already."

"Yes, there he is—in the corner. . . . You will excuse me. I want a few words with him."

Their eyes followed Trevivian's slight, stooping figure on its way towards a sofa in the far corner of the room. . . .

For a long time that evening two figures sat together on the corner sofa, the one slim and dark, the other long-limbed, broad, fair-haired. People noticed but did not interrupt them. . . . That was Trevivian, *the* Trevivian—yes, the little one, nearest the bust of Pompey or Cæsar or whoever it was. And the other must be his friend, the Marquis' half-brother—a fine-looking man but with a bad reputation, rumour said. . . . Tories of good family, unquestioned loyalty, and transparent mediocrity eyed the pair enviously. They wished that they might have been the recipient of Mr. Trevivian's confidences for a whole evening—especially at a time like this, when places were being given away!

On the sofa near the bust of Pompey, under the great fluted columns clustered at that end of the enormous room, Trevivian was saying:

"You remember the morning we met Morval in Piccadilly?"

Norton nodded, half-smiling.

"I said I should offer you Petersburg again when we came back," Trevivian continued. "You remember?"

"Yes."

"Well—we have come back."

They looked at one another. Trevivian could see

the shadow of doubt flicker across the perfect, impassive features.

"We have come back," he repeated.

"I thought you were joking that morning," Norton said at length. "Besides, people are saying I failed before. Why send me again?"

A gesture of exasperation escaped Trevivian. "Oh, people! What does it matter what *people* say? You know and I know that no living man in your place could have done a thing to save Europe from Austerlitz—not a thing! Do you really suppose—— A lot of fat-headed gossip. . . ."

He tailed off into petulant incoherence.

"You know Petersburg," he resumed after a moment. "You know the Court and the Czar. They all liked you. . . . And another point. The man there now is indiscreet. He has been giving the Russians to understand that England is thinking of throwing up the sponge. They don't know where they stand. God knows they have a case against us—the way the Whigs have been treating them for the last year. You can't expect the Autocrat to make many allowances for the vagaries of the party government system. He doesn't even understand the first principles of it, I suppose. All he wants to know is that England will stand by him to the death. . . . And that's what I want you to tell him."

Norton shifted his position slightly. "You think—I'm the right man?"

"We've gone over all that, haven't we?"

"Yes, I suppose so. It's very good of you. . . . I don't know what to say."

Trevivian smiled—that grim smile his glass often gave back to him as he dressed.

"I shouldn't have to explain to many men the precise reasons why I wanted them to take an important mission." He glanced round. "I could count a dozen worthy gentlemen in this room now who would give years of life for the chance. . . . Look here, Norton. I'm not doing this because you're my friend. I'm doing it because you have a certain air about you that foreigners associate with the Englishman of the ruling classes. Rightly or wrongly, you give them the idea that in you they see the traditional Englishman—solid, firm as a rock, imperturbable, phlegmatic, a tower of strength that nothing in the world can shake. The stability of England. . . .

"They laugh at us," he added, "but they trust us. We are unimaginative, but we are to be relied upon utterly. The Englishman's sense of honour and duty and responsibility is the best security under the sun!"

Trevivian paused. Not a muscle had moved in Norton's face. Only, now that he had finished, a faint ironic smile settled in the fine eyes.

"You think I represent all that?" Norton said.

"To be candid—No. I suggested that you conveyed the impression, especially to foreigners, that you represented all that."

"I see. . . . When should I have to start?"

"Then—you will take it?"

Norton nodded slowly. "Yes. I will take it. . . ."

In the small hours of the following morning, Trevivian, as often, in office or out, lay awake.

Mrs. Trevivian, rousing, heard him stir. She was vexed.

"Haven't you been to sleep yet, dear?" she asked.

"Yes, my dear."

She did not believe him. "What are you worrying about?"

"Nothing. I'm not worrying."

"What are you thinking about then?"

"Oh, nothing, my dear—just Norton and the Petersburg Mission and one thing and another."

"Well, go to sleep. Time enough to think about all that in the day."

That, Trevivian considered, was where she was wrong. The daylight hours were definitely not long enough for all he had to do and think about. He did not complain, however. The sense of attainment supported him magnificently through the weight of care, the burden of detail, the infinite decisions and interminable irritations that power had brought in its train. . . . Still, the day was, certainly, not long enough. For the twentieth time he went over in his mind that matter of the Petersburg Mission. How far had he been influenced by personal considerations? He had wanted very much to get Norton out of the Slough of Despond he had fallen into. To that extent private friendship had indeed influenced his judgment. Had he not even cherished some vague idea of bringing about a happy issue to this business of Norton and the Princess Barbarov, or whatever her name was? If so, he was open to censure. And yet, what ambassador could he possibly have sent, more imposing, more magnificently English, than Norton? He had meant every word he had said under the great fluted columns at the Stone ball, a few hours ago. . . . Drowsiness invaded him pleasantly. After all, it was probably the best thing—to send Norton. . . . Who was that woman Norton had been talking to, just before he left? Always talking to some woman, Norton was—that was his wild

beast. . . . He would never do much—until he overcame—his wild beast. . . .

Mrs. Trevivian, a few moments later, had the maternal comfort of hearing his quiet, even breathing. She listened for a few minutes, then, reassured, settled back to enjoy her own simple, easily recoverable rest.

§ v

On the voyage out, during his solitary walks up and down the deck, Norton mentally traversed more than once that evening at Goward's ball, the long talk with Trevivian and the unexpected meeting, when everything was nearly over, with Joan Stathern.

He had gone to the library for a few minutes to get away from the crowd. He was familiar with every corner of the house, as a person only can be who has lived there in childhood, and it was a perfectly easy matter to slip out of the great ballroom, down one long passage, up another shorter one, and in at the door of the library.

There were lights in the room. He was not altogether surprised at that, for as long as he remembered the library had been used as a sitting-out place, when big social functions were going on, for people who, for one reason or another, wanted a momentary relief from the company of their fellows. What he had not dreamed of was that he would find Joan Stathern seated by the fire, her hands in her lap, her gaze fixed upon the coals.

She looked up as he entered.

"Hello, Norton," she said, quite calmly.

He was startled. The picture by the fire, following his exciting interview with Trevivian, tied his tongue.

"Don't look as if I were a ghost," she protested.

"Though I suppose," she added thoughtfully, "I must seem rather like one to you."

He came forward. "How stupid of me, Joan. . . . But—I thought you were abroad."

She laughed. "Sit down," she said. "Our hostess will be back in a minute."

"You are waiting for her?"

"Yes. She left me here. I felt faint all of a sudden—out there. I'm better now."

"I had no idea you were in the house at all."

"No?" She shrugged. "Still—with such a crowd —"

"Yes. There is a big crowd. The affair has gone quite 'swimmingly'—as Susan would say." He leaned forward towards her. "Tell me what you've been doing all this time. How long is it? Two years?"

"And six months."

"You have an accurate memory."

She looked at him in a way that made him drop his eyes. He could not face that wistful reproach.

"Yes," she said, "I have a good memory."

"Do you know," he resumed, bringing the conversation back with an effort to the domain of small-talk, "I thought I saw you in Piccadilly about three months ago. A lady passed driving—in an open carriage. I could have sworn it was you."

Leaning back in her chair and tapping with her fan upon the arm—"It was," she said. "I saw you—with Mr. Trevivian."

"Why didn't you stop?"

The tapping abruptly ceased. "You know why, Norton." She glanced up quizzically. "I suppose you couldn't associate me with a carriage. My aunt died and left me a little money—that's the whole secret."

"You don't live with your brother now?"

"Not very much. I drift about a good deal."

"I heard you were going to Damascus," he said.

She laughed again. "Did you hear about that?" For a moment she seemed to loiter among her thoughts. "That fell through," she said at last. "Though I don't say I shan't revive the idea one day."

He pondered. "Aren't you sometimes—lonely? I mean—living that sort of life——"

"Oh, yes." There was a touch of asperity in her tone. "I'm lonely enough, sometimes!"

Her features hardened in the moment of bitterness, revealing how much she had "gone off" in the last two years. Then, when she spoke again, she seemed to be not a day older than when he and she had talked of love, with the hungry seagulls wheeling around, by the parapet of Richmond Bridge.

"Do you ever hear from Rookwith?" she asked him.

"No—never."

"Neither do I. He was ordered abroad—somewhere or other. He seems to have been just swallowed up."

They mused together over recollections of Rookwith.

"He was a gallant soul," Norton said at length.

"You speak as though he were dead already."

"For all we know he may be."

She considered this. "We should surely have heard."

"Yes, I suppose really we should. There was the perrage, of course—the succession, and so on. Besides, he was quite well known, in a way. . . . I should be sorry to hear that anything had happened to old Rookwith."

A sigh escaped her. "Life is—a dreadful muddle. Don't you think so?"

The door opened. Countess came in.

"Why, Norton," she exclaimed, "however did you get in here?"

Joan answered for him. "He just walked in at the door—like Poverty. . . ."

A rather difficult reply to take up, he considered, mentally reviewing the little interlude as he paced the deck of the dull and languid vessel that was supposed to be taking him to Copenhagen. Countess had laughed it off. She was woman of the world enough to deal with the most disconcerting situations the malice of chance could contrive. They had gone back to the ballroom together, and the talk with Joan had been necessarily cut short. He saw her once again before he left the house, but for a moment only.

"I am going back to Russia soon," he told her. "A great secret. You will not tell?"

She looked at him gravely. "I will not tell." Then: "You are going—to *her*?"

Their eyes met. There was no need to tell how, in the course of that drifting life she mentioned so casually, she had kept her finger upon the pulse of his life.

He nodded. "Yes, I suppose I am going—to *her*."

She looked away, as though by doing so she might achieve the illusion, in that crowded room, of being alone. He waited for her to speak.

Somebody passed them, on the way to the door. It was Trevivian apparently going home. He waved a silent, friendly greeting as he went by.

"That was Mr. Trevivian, wasn't it?" she said, conversationally.

"Yes. He's a very important man now."

"I presume so. He looks older—like most of us." Abruptly she offered him her hand, firm and brown, not

like a society woman's hand. "The best of luck, Norton. . . . And—happiness——"

She slipped away. When he caught a glimpse of her again she was saying good-bye to Countess, as serenely calm as when, just now, he had opened the door of the library and found her sitting by the fire.

§ VI

History records, with variations, that summer's military and political transformations.

In May, when Norton left London, the Czar and the Corsican were hurling defiance at one another; in July they dined daily together at Tilsit, seated side by side, and signed a Treaty of Peace; by September the Czar—the Frenchman Savary close by—was leading his Guards back into Petersburg, with great pomp; and at the end of October, Russia declared war on England.

That, in brief, was the march of events.

It was not, on the whole, entirely surprising, taking into consideration the unusual make-up of the Autocrat. When you are a despotic monarch and, at the same time, a well-intentioned, impressionable ideologist, you are likely to behave with a certain inconsistency on occasion. On this particular occasion, too, the Autocratic consistency was especially hard pressed. There was the Peace Party, speaking with the authority of the Grand Duke Constantine; there was the psychologically decisive defeat of Friedland; there was the voice of the Corsican, murmuring insidious things about the twin Empires, Russia and France, that should divide the world between them; and there were the dregs of the English alliance, bitter, unpalatable, already a source of infinite irritations. . . . The signposts all pointed one way.

To Norton, as to every ruling-class Englishman, the Autocrat's abandonment of England was necessarily incomprehensible, since the greatness of the English name is founded largely on the ignoring of signposts. To trim to the wind, to find good reasons for doubtful actions, to rally bravely to the winning side—these are intellectual exercises in which, as a race, we have always been lamentably deficient.

Anyhow, Norton arrived at long last in the harbour of Copenhagen, whence he embarked again for Memel Roads within twenty-four hours. He knew that the Czar was, or was supposed to be, at Tilsit, sixty miles from Memel, and that Bonaparte was not far from the same place. That, however, was all he did know. Things were happening—as to that there was not the slightest question—but precisely what things they were nobody he met could tell him. He was conscious of a sinister sort of hush in European affairs, like the dull and ominous calm before the deluge. Meanwhile, here he was, on a sluggish boat bound for Memel, ignorant, probably impotent, surrounded by hostile influences whose intention was that he should fail in the purpose that had brought him hither. . . .

Besides, there was the question of Natalya. He had written to her, immediately the official confirmation of Trevivian's offer came through. And she had not replied. That, of course, was by no means inexplicable. All sorts of things happened to letters in war-time. Still, he had written, quite clearly, "I expect to be at Copenhagen by the end of May," adding the address at which letters would reach him. But there was no letter for him at Copenhagen—not even a formal note expressing polite gratification at his re-appointment. That would, at least, have been something. He would

have caught the echo of her voice, the shadow of her personality. The queer, foreign writing would have brought to his mind's eye those long white hands—rather like Anne Caversham's—resting lightly on the keyboard of the piano at her country house. Even that, however, was denied. From Petersburg, from the house by the Taurid Gardens, there came no sign at all.

The month that followed was a month of suspense, of anxiety and confusion. He reached Tilsit and duly saw the Czar. It was, he realised very dimly, a moment of many implications, a point of contact between his own life and the main current of history. Here, in this out-of-the-way place, a significant episode was being added to the succession of incidents which marks the development of Europe. All this would be recorded, misrepresented, discussed, argued about, endlessly handled and surveyed—when he and all the other actors in it were dead. The very name of the place would be a by-word to schoolboys. . . . Yet, looking back on it, years after, he could recapture no sense of the transcendent importance of the occasion—nothing that, at the moment, had really moved or stirred him.

There had been audiences, dinners, conferences. He was listened to, treated with respect, accorded lip-service—but there had lurked always, behind these polite manifestations, the feeling that he was being shelved, that smirks and shrugs followed his progress through the official ante-chambers, that England no longer counted. His awareness of this was, at the time, mercifully incomplete. Never very sensitive to *nuances* of tone and manner, he was too busy, in the heat of the day, to notice everything. It was only afterwards,

remembering, that he perceived how, against the confused background, the delicate poisoned arrows had been aimed at him from the very instant of his landing at Memel. . . .

Sacks was depressed, uneasy. His narrow escape at Olmütz had inspired him with a nervous distaste for the vicinity of the French. When the Russians had to fall back, after Friedland, he was consumed with restlessness, forever gazing unhappily up and down the street, or making incessant little journeys to the stables to see that the means of flight were in good order.

Norton met him one day walking thoughtfully back across the yard, after one of these investigations.

"When do we leave, my lord?" Sacks asked, halting abruptly.

Norton replied that he couldn't tell. That was in the fateful days between Friedland and the signing of the Treaty. Everything depended on swaying the Czar, however little, in those days. It was unthinkable to go on to Petersburg until something had been settled one way or the other.

"You'll be safe enough, Sacks," he added.

"I'm sure I hope so, sir. Still, you remember how it was before."

"Yes. This is different, though."

Sacks pursed his lips. It was not his place to argue the point with his master, and he was a servant who knew the precise delimitations of his place.

"Seems like we bring bad luck with us, my lord," he observed, in a tone of polite detachment.

His jaunty figure, very grey-haired now, but still a source of tender excitements to the "young women" he continued infallibly to find in the more intimate parts

of inns and hotels, proceeded on its way across the yard and disappeared through the open kitchen door.

Afterwards, his servant's parting shot recurred to Norton, almost disagreeably. Did he really carry bad luck with him? It was absurd yet—nothing, the fact remained, had ever turned out right in his official life. Those old negotiations with the French, when he had gone over with Lord Calne, had failed dismally. Then, his first Russian embassy had ended in Austerlitz. And now, this one seemed fraught with even worse disaster. . . . Yes, it was, quite definitely, a disagreeable reflection, for failure has never yet been sweet. Norton had listened to many a sneer at success and at successful men from time to time, but always, under the sneer, there had been the savour of the sour grapes. . . .

To the last he trusted the Russians. He did not believe that the Czar would knuckle under to Bonaparte. Alexander himself had assured him that he would rather abdicate than bow the knee before the Corsican. And that, he felt, was still true. Even after the meeting on the Niemen raft, after all hope was gone, it was true that Alexander would not "bow the knee". Norton gave the Autocrat credit for that much. But the astuteness of Bonaparte lay in his avoidance of any such demands. It was, he insinuated, by his side that the Czar was needed, not at his feet.

The trickery was successful. All tricks are likely to succeed once. In that mental mirror before which he so often posed, Alexander saw the seductive picture of the two Emperors dividing the world. It was a real temptation for a well-intentioned despot—that gift of half the world to improve and uplift and legislate for. He would, perhaps, hardly have been true to himself had he not fallen.

Still, the news, when it was finally confirmed, came as a blow. Friendship with France automatically meant enmity to England. Norton sat down and wrote a long despatch to the Foreign Office—a very good despatch. To this day, the keen disappointment, the lingering incredulity in the face of the damning facts, are still plainly visible through the dignified diplomatic rotundities. At the same time he sent a private note to Trevivian:

“You will see by my despatch that matters are as bad as possible. I suppose rumours will precede it by a week or two. I am going on to Petersburg to-morrow. Please excuse the fewness of these lines. I am tired and rather upset by this business. . . .”

When his writing was done, he called Sacks.

“Begin packing at once, Sacks,” he told him.

Sacks brightened perceptibly. “Yes, my lord. Is it Petersburg, my lord?”

“Yes. We must start by eleven to-morrow morning.”

At eleven next morning the carriages were waiting at the door.

Six days later, after a hot and dusty journey, they rattled in through the suburbs of the capital.

§ VII

That night, and all next day, he was busy on the work of the Embassy. It was not unpleasant to be in the familiar surroundings again, dealing with papers, getting *au fait* with various matters his predecessor had left unfinished, discussing things with Willy. All that day he worked hard, hugging to himself at intervals the expectation that in the evening he would see Natalya. He sent her no message. It would be better

to come upon her by surprise. In that way he might perhaps learn her real feelings, before she had time to prepare her mind for the encounter.

The plan went wrong. When, dressed with care, he called at the house by the Taurid Gardens, he was told that Princess Barbarov was out. She had gone to the Opera, so the *demoiselle de compagnie* informed him.

"Madame will be desolated to have missed seeing milord," she added, in cool, impersonal tones.

He glanced curiously at her, but the Frenchwoman's face revealed nothing.

"Was she coming straight back from the Opera?" he enquired.

That, the *demoiselle* did not know. It was possible that Madame might go on to Princess Dolgorouki's reception. She could not tell.

He thanked her, came away, and drove to the Opera. There, the house was full. Not a box, not a part of a box, was to be had. He enquired whether Princess Barbarov was in the theatre, but the harassed official could not tell him. He was a comparative stranger in Petersburg and knew neither Norton nor the Princess.

Dispirited, Norton was taking his departure, wondering vaguely how the devil he could spend the rest of his evening, when a man he knew—a general he had seen something of at Olmütz—came out through one of the doors of the vestibule.

The general looked at him in casual fashion, then again more closely. Finally he swung round on his heel.

"Lord Norton Fitzwarren, surely?" he said.

Norton smiled. "I was looking for a friend," he remarked.

"Petersburg will be glad to have you back again,"

the general continued amiably. "I'm afraid your predecessor did a certain amount of harm—wasn't popular in society, and so on. Ambassadors should always be popular. . . . Did you find your friend, by the way?"

"No. I was told Princess Barbarov was in the house. The man here is new and doesn't know one Princess from another at present. Possibly you could help me."

The general blinked twice. Reflections were plainly formulating in his slow-moving military mind.

"Yes," he announced at last, "she is in Princess Chirsky's box—her brother's wife, you know. Shall I tell her you are here?"

"It would be a friendly act."

"Not at all—not at all!"

He took Norton's arm and led him along one of those mysterious interminable passages which seem always to be necessary to any well-conducted theatre. The army, he explained to Norton, *en route*, was far from pleased with the present state of affairs. The Czar (*sotto voce*) had been weak. He had committed the Russian people to a course which seriously jeopardised the national honour. Friedland had not been a defeat—merely a strategic retirement. One more effort and the Russian army could have crippled Bonaparte. Whereas, now, they had lost England and gained nothing in return. Because, of course, nobody with a grain of discernment could suppose that Bonaparte would keep faith a moment longer than it suited him to do so.

"They say Savary is coming here," he growled. "We shall all have to bow and scrape to the man who murdered the Duc d'Enghien."

He stopped before a door marked M, and knocked lightly. A man opened it, and a whispered colloquy

took place against the background of the Second Act of *Richard Cœur de Lion*. Finally the general returned to where Norton waited.

"Princess Barbarov will be here in one moment. . . . And remember, Lord Norton, the Russian army is on your side, whatever the Czar may do."

Norton thanked him warmly for his good offices, and the friendly general prowled off down the long dim-lit passage, to consummate whatever purpose it was that his meeting with Norton in the vestibule had interrupted.

Through the insubstantial partition that formed the back wall of the boxes the well-known strains of *Richard* rose and fell, muffled by the distance. A latch clicked.

Natalya was standing under the solitary light that hung over the door of the box.

"I did not expect you so soon," she said.

He walked towards her, taking in the detail of her person hungrily. Bare-headed, with eyes closed, he bent over the hand she extended to him.

"I could not wait," he told her.

"You have been to my house?"

"Yes. Your demoiselle sent me here. I risked your displeasure."

She smiled. "But I am not displeased, Norton."

There was something unreal, theatrical, in the low-toned, earnest conversation, the deep shadows flung against the wall, the way their two figures seemed to be dramatised by the flickering light and the wide bare surfaces. And she was lovelier, far lovelier, than his remembrance of her. That, too, had its unreal aspect, its share in the dream-like quality of their meeting.

"When may I come and see you?" he said.

Without hesitation—"When you like, of course."

He regarded her doubtfully. "You mean that?"

"Of course."

"But—alone?"

"Ah, that is a different matter. Why must you see me alone?"

He searched her face for some key to her mood. What motive could she possibly have for acting this farce—as though those letters to her from Great Stanhope Street had never been written?

"I don't understand, Natalya," he said, trying, as with a child, to be patient and to make allowances. "Don't you *want* to see me?"

The challenge held her for the moment.

"I'm not a coquette," she said at length, apparently refuting a mental self-criticism.

He waited for her.

"And I really am so pleased to see you again," she added. "We must not begin by quarrelling."

"Then I may come?" he pressed.

She nodded. "We will have a long talk."

"To-morrow evening?"

"Yes."

"And—we shall be quite alone?"

"Yes—quite alone. . . . Now I must go back to my brother. I am sure he trembles already for my virtue."

They both smiled.

"He need not tremble," Norton ventured.

"You think not?"

She appeared to consider the matter thoughtfully and dispassionately, for a moment. Then she added:

"Who knows? Once is enough, after all, in a matter of that kind."

She gave him her hand. Taking it in his he said, more from reluctance to let her go than any other motive:

"Is the Diana broken yet?"

She understood immediately. "Why should it be?"

"I don't know—carelessness, indifference, perhaps."

Their eyes met.

"No," she said, "the Diana is not broken. . . ."

There was a sound of advancing steps beyond the bend of the passage.

"To-morrow then," she said, withdrawing her hand.

"To-morrow."

The door opened, Norton was conscious of a brief clear fragment of a tenor solo cleaving the air, then she was gone.

§ VIII

She kept her promise. On the following evening they were alone.

When he arrived, Natalya was—inevitably, it seemed now—in the reclining-chair, near one of the windows. The late sunset streaming in over the housetops covered her with gold. There was the same bric-à-brac, the same air of a background carelessly conceived, the chance product of laziness and acquiescence.

The demoiselle, reading aloud in the last light, closed her book.

Natalya said: "That will do, Thérèse."

"Madame would like candles brought?"

"In a moment, Thérèse. . . . I will ring."

Thérèse retired. Her glance as she passed Norton, a glance so slight as to be hardly perceptible, was a part of the ambiguous, indeterminate atmosphere that seemed to fill the house. . . .

"You look tired," Norton said, when the demoiselle was gone.

"I could not sleep last night."

"The opera excited you, perhaps."

She smiled indulgently. "I have been listening to opera since I was a child, my friend."

"Princess Dolgorouki's reception, then."

"I did not go."

He sank into a chair opposite her.

"Me?" he said, tentatively.

"Yes—you. . . . It is ridiculous, isn't it?"

He did not see why it should be ridiculous for his sudden return to excite her, and he said so.

"Men always suppose that women's lives revolve around them," she countered.

"What men are you thinking of?"

"All sorts of men. . . . In my own life—my husband, you, Mourakin."

The name fell harshly across the mellow picture.

"What is he doing now?" Norton asked, perfunctorily.

She pretended not to understand. "Whom do you mean? My husband?"

"No—Mourakin, of course."

She turned her head slightly, fixing her eyes upon the fierce rose of light drooping now behind the chimneys of Petersburg. Her face, a brooding golden mask, seemed in that moment the index of a soul barbaric and aloof. Some quality of ruthlessness in it, a suggestion of indifferent cruelty, made him say:

"Don't look like that."

She half started, as though his words had invaded a profound reverie.

"How was I looking, Norton?"

"Cold, heartless——"

"Like the Diana."

"I didn't say that."

She laughed. "We were talking of Mourakin."

"Yes. I asked you what he did now."

"The same as he always did—dream, lounge, write little essays about perfect worlds."

"You are sorry for him, though."

She nodded. "Yes—I suppose I am sorry for him."

"He—worries you?"

"A little. Not very much. I think he realises now that I do not intend to marry again."

The pebble, dropped so lightly into the pool, sent a thousand ripples over the quiet surface of their talk.

Norton took up the challenge.

"Shall I ring for lights?" he said, casually.

"Why? It is pleasant in the dusk."

"My mother used to say that people who talk in the dark will say things they are afterwards sorry for. . . . Besides—I want to see your face."

He caught her faint shrug. "Very well. Ring, if you like. . . ."

In the candle-light, with the heavy curtains drawn against the world, he felt surer of himself. Sitting down again close to her, he said:

"Natasha."

She looked at him half-sulkily.

"Did you mean that, Natasha? About not intending to marry again?"

"Yes."

"But why?"

"My life is my own, is it not?"

"But—I love you, Natasha."

"So does Mourakin. Or he says so."

"You never loved Mourakin!"

She appeared to ponder for awhile the implications of this.

"Did I ever love you, Norton?" she said at length.

The words had an innocent, impersonal sound, as though she really wanted the information.

"That summer," he reminded her, "in your country house. . . . I was a fool!"

"Yes." Her eyes, glancing across at him, were full of sadness. "You could have had me then—for the asking."

He pressed his advantage. "Why not now?"

"Because—it is different now. You went away. You left me to myself and to the loneliness of my life. I might have died of loneliness, for all you cared——"

"That's not fair!"

"It is fair—and it is true. You would have liked to have me for a summer's liaison, if I had been willing. I wasn't, so you ran away—back to England and your London ladies!"

She seemed to search her memory for a moment, then added, with deliberation:

"Lady Sheen—Lady Guernsey—Mrs. Forsyth—Miss Stathern—Lady Caroline Banks——"

"Natasha!"

"Isn't it true?"

"Who has been poisoning your mind?"

"Nobody. I just listen."

"To gossip and scandal."

Another faint shrug. "As you like. . . ."

He pulled himself together with an effort.

"We must not quarrel like this, Natasha. Of course I know—everybody knows——" He made a fresh start: "It is quite true that I have been very friendly with all those ladies. But that's nothing to do with what I feel for you."

She shook her head. "How am I to be sure of that?"

Mine was to have been the last little scalp around your belt, after all."

"I was mad. . . . I wanted to marry you, to have you for my own, all the while, only I didn't know it."

"And it came to you—suddenly?"

"Yes."

She sighed. "Just as suddenly—it might go again."

"Can't you trust me?"

"No, Norton—I can't."

"Nor your own power over me?"

"No."

He rose with deliberation. "You are very angry with me to-night, Natasha."

Something in his voice made her reach out towards his hand, that hung limply and as though in dejection, beside him.

"I'm not really angry."

"I'm afraid you are. I'm sorry. I thought you would understand—once I could see you."

"Come here," she said.

Shifting her position slightly, she made room for him on a corner of the reclining-chair.

"Listen to me," she continued. "No—give me both your hands and don't interrupt me. . . . You have to see my side of it, after all. Suppose I married you. You would want to take me back to England——"

"I had been looking forward to it."

"No, don't interrupt. . . . We should be married. You would be among your own people, in your own country. But I should be a stranger, an alien. Everything would be different from what I have been used to. Your friends, your relatives, would inspect me and criticize me. They would say—how unwise of you to marry a foreign woman. . . . And then, later on,

I should lose my looks. You would become indifferent to me——”

“Natasha!”

“You would go your old ways, and leave me alone, a foreigner, friendless—that is how it would be.”

He hit back sullenly: “Do you love Russia so much?”

“No, but it is my home. The cow feels safer in her own pasture. And if I cannot live in Italy——”

“Why shouldn’t we live in Italy?”

The point seemed to strike her. She hesitated, searching his face for guidance.

“We could live there as well as in England,” he pursued. Then, advancing into the enemy’s camp: “You are a foolish child, Natasha, and you deserve to be beaten. You lay awake all last night thinking these damnable things, didn’t you?”

“I had to make up my mind.”

The admission comforted him. Diplomatically, he decided not to press too hard, having achieved thus much.

“You look so tired,” he said gently.

“Yes. I shall go to bed early to-night.”

Sitting close to her there he was vividly conscious of her body, of the outline of her breasts beneath her clothes, the pressure of her knee bent against him as she lay in the chair.

“I will leave you now,” he said.

She nodded acquiescence.

Midnight chimed from the small gilt clock on the marble mantelpiece. With an air of determination he heaved his bulky figure up from the low corner of the chair.

“I will call for your maid.”

“No! One moment!”

He turned round in the act of pulling the bell-pull.
"What is it?"

"Come here. . . ."

Drawing his head down, without a word, she pressed her lips in a long kiss against his brow, where it fell back into the thick wavy hair. It was all over in a minute.

"Now pull," she said.

Amazed, obedient, he pulled. In a distant part of the house, like a tiny crying voice of hope, the faint tinkle of the bell reached their ears. . . .

§ IX

The summer days passed. The Czar came back. The Court was more brilliant than ever. Nobody could have supposed, looking at the surface of things, that Russia was a defeated nation, the pensioner of France and living on the forbearance of the Corsican.

At the Embassy the position was difficult. Trevivian, over in England, wanted too much, didn't seem to understand the delicate balance of things at Petersburg. It was impossible to make him see that, for the time being, the best course was to lie low, to wait, to do nothing. Sooner or later, some clear line of action would emerge. The Czar would tire of his chains. He would forget his grievances against England. Then would be the time for a definite policy. Meanwhile, the only possible policy was to avoid bringing on any crisis.

At Natalya's house, too, that policy of waiting seemed to be the right one. Somewhere in the maze of her tortuous personality, beyond the close undergrowth of indecisions, he felt that there lay the ultimate prize—consummation, attainment, the privilege of entering the secret places of her heart. But he was

afraid to press his claims. That first night, with its surprising conclusion, served as a foundation stone for the edifice he built about her. The edifice was crazy. At times, when her incomprehensible vagaries strained him to breaking-point, it almost collapsed. But it never collapsed altogether. There was always the ultimate hope, the ultimate belief in her, the foundations. Some delightful volte-face, some sudden unexpected tenderness—the edifice would soar again to the clouds.

Intimacy with her, he knew, must always be impossible. That was the position he fell back upon, regretfully, at last. Intimacy—not, of course, the intimacy of her boudoir, the sharing of her bed, though even in such physical matters there were degrees that depended upon the things of the spirit for their fulfilment; but the intimacies of her mind, the kind of communion he had experienced with Henrietta Sheen, the sharing of her attitudes, her interests, her whole life. That, finally, was beyond his reach.

It amazed him that, in spite of this, he still clung so desperately to the edifice in his heart, still wanted her with the whole of his being, simply, blindly—not like a man of fashion, but like that country boy whose image had come to him last winter, sitting by his fire at Great Stanhope Street with the book of essays in his hand. . . .

Nearly every evening he went to her house. Sometimes Mourakin and the others were there, sometimes he had her to himself. He never knew which way it would be until he got there. Mourakin treated him with a certain friendly tolerance, as though he, and the reactionary state he represented, no longer mattered much.

"The next thing we shall hear, Lord Norton," he said one night, gravely quizzical, "is that Russia has declared war on England."

"She would never dare," Norton replied.

Mourakin's eyes narrowed. "Why not, pray?"

"She would not dare," Norton repeated, half to himself. Impossible to tell these people what he felt in his heart—the might of England, the sense of her illimitable resources, the deep quiet strength that would outlast the showy adventurers and mushroom empires of the day. Aloud, he added: "She could not risk the shame of it."

Mourakin looked superior. "It is not necessarily shameful, Lord Norton, to fight against England."

"It would be shameful now, for Russia."

"I do not think so."

The point, on the whole, was Mourakin's.

Sitting as usual by the window, the Princess said:

"If war were declared——"

She paused, hesitant. Norton finished for her:

"I should have to leave at once."

"How did you know I was going to say that?" she smiled.

"I can read your mind now, Princess."

He did not mean that. It was little more than a glancing shot at Mourakin. But she took it literally.

"Do you really think so?" she said, with a serious, concerned air. "Because that is more than I can do. All my life, I have rarely known what was in my own mind."

Mourakin bowed slightly. "That is your charm, Princess."

"Thank you. But you understand that it makes life difficult."

For the rest of that evening she was very quiet. And when Norton left—with Mourakin, according to a queer implicit pact they observed now—she seemed half inclined to send Mourakin away first, as though she had something to say. But the intention, if it was so much, failed on the way to her lips. She said good-bye with troubled, weary eyes. . . .

There was a day, too, when Norton, calling at the house by the Taurid Gardens, found two horses at the door, held by a groom in the imperial livery. He knew at once what that meant. Only the Autocrat, of all the royal family, went about in that ostentatiously simple fashion. The Czar—with Natasha. . . . He walked on, past the door. When, half an hour later, he returned, the horses and the groom were gone. He mounted the steps and knocked.

Natasha received him listlessly.

"You succeed the Narychkin then?" he said.

For a full minute she was silent, then,

"You should know me better than that," she replied.

"I wish I knew the tiniest corner of you."

"At least, you know that I do not wish to be any man's mistress."

He took her hand. "Don't take me so seriously, Natasha."

"The Russians are a serious-minded race."

"That is their misfortune. . . . What did your visitor come for?"

"To see me."

"Naturally."

"About my divorce," she explained. "You see," she added, "a divorce here is not easy, as in England. Over there, you get your Parliament to do it. It is simple if you have money enough. But here, we have

no Parliament. There are only the Czar and the Church. And the Church does not love divorce."

He nodded slowly. "I see. . . . Then—you *are* going to marry me, Natasha—after all?"

"I did not say that."

"But—I may hope?"

"The poorest man may do as much."

She would say no more. She was tired, she told him. He must go away. . . .

A few days later there was a grand fête at the Court. It is true of all Governments that the greater the display, the less assured is the fundamental position. The ruling classes—the aristocracy, the world of fashion, the military caste—were dissatisfied with the peace. The Court was unpopular. It was, therefore, deemed desirable to blind the eyes of the ruling classes with much splendour—an age-old device that never yet succeeded.

Norton went, as in duty bound, to this particular fête, and found it, as he might have expected, magnificently dull. It had, however, its significance.

For one thing, Natalya was there. That alone was significant, for as a rule she never went to Court functions. The Czar was known to dislike her. "A dangerous intrigante," he was said to have called her, his own taste being for simple, straightforward women, with whom you knew where you were. So that her invitation to the fête seemed to suggest the lifting of a ban.

The affair was half over before Norton saw her. He had been out on a balcony, enjoying the night air. After the glitter of the ball-room, the respite was very welcome. The light breeze, the darkness, the scent from some flowering shrubs that filled the corners of the balcony, combined to produce in him a kind of peaceful,

mindless melancholy, a melancholy not oppressive, not even unpleasant. . . .

The door from the room behind opened. A stream of yellow light was thrust into the darkness. Somebody came out on to the balcony.

Norton turned his head. The new-comer was a wizened, ornate man—one of that large section of Petersburg society to whom he had been presented but whose names he did not remember. Willy, he seemed to recollect, had spoken to him once about this individual.

He coughed, and the wizened man started slightly.

"I hope I do not disturb you," he said. The words were polite, but the slanting Tartar eyes gleamed malevolently.

Norton disclaimed all suggestion of disturbance.

"Lord Norton Fitzwarren, is it not?" the wizened man added, peering uncertainly.

"At your service, sir. . . . We have met before, I think."

"Yes. At Prince Bagration's." A thoughtful pause, followed by a clearing of the throat. "A lovely night," the wizened man said, with unction.

"A very fine night."

"Better, perhaps, on a night like this, to be in the country—boating, possibly, or listening to a little music in one's own home."

"Much better," Norton agreed.

The wizened man leaned upon the iron railing of the balcony and gazed out over the dim palace grounds.

"You are taking a country house again this summer, Lord Norton?" he enquired.

"Perhaps—when Petersburg becomes intolerable."

"You are, no doubt, fond of country life."

"All Englishmen are fond of country life."

"True, true." The wizened man apparently pondered this, then with apparent irrelevance continued: "So Princess Barbarov is here to-night."

Norton frowned in the dark. Natalya here. . . . That was very strange. She had said nothing about it last night at her house.

"Are you quite certain?" he asked the wizened man.

"Quite certain. In fact, I have just seen her. She came late, as is her custom." He smiled to himself. "I agree that her presence is very odd. . . . The Narychkin will possibly think so too."

Norton let that pass. So they were saying things already. Not that that mattered particularly. No beautiful woman could live as Natalya did and remain untouched by dirty hands. But it was certainly incomprehensible, her being here like this.

"It is getting chilly," he said. "If you will excuse me, I will go in again."

The wizened man, with a faint, ironic bow, returned to his contemplation of the night. . . .

In the ball-room a new dance had just begun. Norton, lounging by the door, searched the faces of the crowd, his glance roving restlessly over the gyrating company. . . . Ah, there, at last, she was—in black, a figure of austere and elusive loveliness. And the man she was with—tall, fair, almost English-looking, in the uniform of a crack regiment, covered with orders—the Autocrat himself!

As they passed near him, his eye met Natalya's. Her expression was calm, withdrawn. The faintest movement of the full lips, as though she gave him some message—that was all. There was nothing he could grasp, nothing to interpret. . . . His attention shifted

to her partner. The Autocrat of all the Russias, with the unselfconsciousness that is the natural heritage of royalties, wore a little air of triumph. The imperial gaze resting upon Norton for an instant, seemed to say: "Neither you nor Mourakin, but I—if I choose."

Norton knew that the Czar would not choose. His air of triumph meant nothing. He liked to flaunt his power a little, to show the Englishman that his was still the ultimate decision—that he held Norton's happiness in the hollow of his hand. That was all.

That, indeed, was enough.

All night Norton tried in vain to get a private word with Natalya. She was hemmed in by people who imagined that they saw in her the New Favourite, a being vitally necessary to placate. He perceived that, for the time, the situation amused her. . . .

Next evening, at her house, he said:

"The gossip already is that you are the Czar's mistress."

She turned her head lazily towards him. "That will pass."

"Unless it is true."

"You are absurd," she replied. "I believe you are jealous."

"No. I have not that right."

"That is so—but I have found that people are often most jealous who have no right to be."

He brooded for a moment, chin on hand. "Did you press him—about the divorce?"

"Yes."

"Well?"

"He said he could not tell me anything for certain. He would try to help. It is all very difficult, very complicated."

Norton made a gesture of dismay. "You Russians!" he exclaimed.

"What do you mean?"

"Your indecisions, your hesitancies, your loose, shilly-shallying way of life!"

She smiled at his petulance. "What would you have? We are made so."

"Did he say when you might expect to hear something definite?"

"No."

"Did you ask him?"

"No. What was the use? I have his goodwill. Now I must leave it to him."

He looked at her and, involuntarily, sighed.

"What is the matter?" she said, gently.

"Nothing. Only—it all seems so hopeless. It makes me wish I had never come back."

She left her chair and sat, as once before, on the arm of his. Her voice, when she spoke, was almost sad:

"Don't say that, Norton. Don't reproach me like that."

"I can't help it. There seems no way out, the way we are going now."

"You must be patient."

"I am tired of being patient."

He turned towards her brusquely. "If you cannot get your divorce, what will you do?"

She regarded him with puzzled eyes. "I do not understand."

"Will you come away with me?"

"And live together—in sin?"

"Live together anyhow—anywhere. What does it matter? We can go to Italy—or somewhere. And live quietly, just for one another."

He watched her face. She was, he knew, deeply religious, like every good Russian woman. His words clashed with all her inherited convictions, all her training. But, damn it all! He, too, had convictions. It didn't cost a Fitzwarren nothing to make that offer about living together in Italy—*hiding* together there. Fitzwarrens might have *affaires*, liaisons. But to live permanently outside the pale, to cut yourself off from the great world that was a part of your birthright—a man didn't face that without good reason.

"Well?" he said at last.

"I don't know," she replied, slowly.

"You *ought* to know, Natasha!"

"If you scold me, I shall tell you to go."

Her coldness, that delicately callous indifferentism, suddenly infuriated him. He rose from the chair and took her by the shoulders. Her quiet eyes looked up at him, perfectly unmoved.

"Suppose I won't go," he said.

She merely shrugged.

The shrug brought the colour to his cheeks. His grip upon her tightened until he had lifted her up from the arm of the chair and was holding her closely to him. He felt drunk, exalted. The nearness of her clouded his brain, obscured his sense of what was normal and fit. She struggled silently in his arms and he laughed at her struggles. Very dimly, as in a dream, he remembered carrying her to a sofa and bending over her pale exhausted figure, exquisite in disorder. . . .

§ x

Actually, it was no longer than twenty seconds that he stood there by the sofa, brooding down upon her recumbent form. In that convulsed, unbalanced

moment, it seemed an age. What he would have done, had the moment continued, he ever afterwards hesitated to consider. His uncertainties, the maddening indecisions of the past months, might have burst in an annihilating tempest over his mind, have led him towards an abyss of animal rage. It so happened, however, that, at the end of the twenty seconds, there came from the street, through the open window, the obscene wailings of two amorous cats. . . . The absurd, offensive noise somehow cleared his brain. He was conscious of shame, bitter, overwhelming. . . . He, an English gentleman, a Fitzwarren! His forehead was dank and cold with sweat. He mopped it with his handkerchief, dully, mechanically. In one of his knuckles he was conscious of pain, and, glancing at it, he saw the skin was broken and bleeding. Her teeth, in that disgraceful struggle, had bitten through his flesh. . . .

A great shudder passed over him.

"Natasha!" he gasped.

She did not move or speak, only for an instant opened her eyes and looked at him inscrutably. He was amazed that, at such a crisis, she was still the same, still aloof, withdrawn, impenetrable.

"Forgive me, Natasha!" he pleaded.

The deep eyes closed. Faintly, as though from far away,

"You had better go," she said.

He stumbled across the room. At the door he turned. "Good-bye, Natasha," he tried, a last flicker of hope rising in his heart.

He waited a little while, but there was no response.

Very quietly, feeling for the first time in his life like an uncaught criminal, sooner or later to be brought to book, he made his way downstairs and out into the street.

§ XI

That same night he instructed Willy to get hold of a furnished house in the country—any house, in any district, but it must be ready for occupation at once.

“Not *to-morrow*?” Willy verified, incredulously. It was not the Lord’s usual way to order his movements in such a reckless fashion.

“Yes—to-morrow—without fail.”

Willy wondered, but held his peace. He had never seen the Lord look so queer before. A subdued misery in the celebrated eyes, a dejection that seemed to obliterate entirely the magnificent and commanding presence. And then this sudden decision—— Willy was sorry for the Lord. He wished Princess Barbarov would surrender unconditionally and be done with it. But he nevertheless secured, by noon next day, a desirable house in the country, quite close to the one which the Lord had rented before. The same river washed the garden wall. The same road led to the house where Princess Barbarov had lived two years ago. The Lord was inclined to scowl a little when Willy explained the situation of the house. Was there nothing else, in a different district?

Willy confirmed that this house was, in fact, the best of a poor lot, the cream having been skimmed by earlier applicants. And that day the Lord left the Embassy. Willy only saw him at intervals for nearly two months. . . .

Norton’s first few days at the country house were spent under a swinging sword. Every knock at the door, every passer by his gates even, seemed for a panicky instant like the coming of retribution. He boated a

good deal on the river, making furtively for little sheltered backwaters and only returning at nightfall. It was all very absurd, but he could not help it. Obsession, a ruthless charioteer, drove madly round and round the arena of his weary brain.

One of his first visitors was Natalya herself, very charming in light, summery garments, smiling at him from her carriage. She had sent her man up the drive to enquire whether he was at home and to bring him forth if he was.

She gave him her hand. Her greeting was simple and unconstrained.

"What sort of a place have you got this year?" she said.

Not a sign of displeasure, not the least hint that, only a few nights ago, he had insulted her, in her own house, beyond the extreme limit of tolerance. . . . He gazed at her in speechless wonder.

"Would you like to see it?" he said, at last.

"Not to-day, I think. . . . Ivan would like a drink, though, I expect. Where is the kitchen?"

"The green door at the side."

She said something in Russian to the big bearded man, waiting by the horses. Ivan smiled expansively, touched his cap, and made off up the drive again. They were alone.

For a full minute neither spoke. Then Norton began, without looking at her:

"I have been aching to see you—to tell you——"

"And why did you not come to me?" she demanded.

"How could I?"

"Why not?"

"But—after what happened——"

She brooded a moment. The sunshine, falling through

the thin straw brim of her hat, made gold patterns upon her cheek.

"That is over and done with," she replied. "We were both to blame. But it could not be helped. It was bound to happen. And, of course, it was an experience. No man had ever treated me in that way before."

"But, Natasha, you told me to go. You would not say good-bye."

"Naturally. I did not wish to commit adultery."

He glanced at her doubtfully. "Was that all?"

She nodded. The gold pattern-work wavered on her pale cheeks. "You would have had to take me by force," she said slowly.

"And suppose I had done that?"

"You would have been sorry afterwards—more sorry than you are already."

He kicked a small stone viciously across the road.

"You make men mad," he told her.

"Men?"

"Well—me."

She smiled at him, so sweetly, with such a warmth of intimacy, that he might have sworn she loved him. On any other woman's lips, in any other woman's eyes, that smile could have meant nothing else.

"It isn't a matter to smile about," he protested.

For reply, she laid her hand upon his, where it rested on the side of the carriage.

"I will promise you something," she said.

His eyes, sullen and suspicious, met hers. What new torture was she inventing for him now?

"I promise," she added, "that if I ever remarry—it shall be you."

He considered this.

"Then—you do love me, Natasha?" he said at last.

"As much as I love anybody, Norton."

In the silence that ensued, the footsteps of Ivan became gradually audible up the drive as he strode back from the kitchen. . . .

§ XII

Norton had to be content with that. The promise, vague and conditional as it was, represented the limit of her capacity for decision. Finality, the power of making up her mind, the desire to get her own way—all these were outside her nature. With her, everything was open, everything was subject to chance, to fate, to God. In all her life there was only one act that signified an abandonment of those acquiescences which were the core of her being. Her refusal to consummate her marriage with Barbarov stood out, a lonely pinnacle of resolution in the desert of fatalism. Yet even that decision was a negative one, he reflected.

He gave it up. He loved her, he wanted her passionately, but he would never understand her. . . .

He spent the summer between the Embassy and his country house. Natalya could not obtain a house near his, so she stayed in the town. She excused herself on the ground that she could pester the Czar better in Petersburg.

"But *are* you pestering him?" Norton queried one day.

He did not in his heart believe that she was, and it surprised him when she replied:

"Alexander has been here twice. And I saw him at Prince Galitzin's masquerade the other night."

"Has anything been done?"

"I could not find out."

"It is ridiculous. He has only to say a word to the Church people."

She seemed to agree. "Do you know——?" she began, then paused thoughtfully.

He waited for her.

"I don't think, Norton," she continued, "that the Czar likes you very well."

"You mean—if it were anyone else——"

"Yes. If it were anyone else—a Russian or a Frenchman—he would help me more than he is doing now."

They were in her boudoir, to which he was admitted regularly now that she felt safe with him. His attack upon her, she realised clearly, had made a deep impression upon him. He was an older, humbler man. His suffering would prevent his ever falling into such a chasm of passion again.

At her words he rose restlessly from his chair and wandered round the room, fetching up at last by the window. Standing there, apparently sunk in meditation, he suddenly said:

"We may wait for ever then."

"I don't think so. Alexander is capricious."

But he shook his head. "I see now—I suppose I ought to have cultivated him more. I didn't realise ——"

He tailed off miserably.

"Things will change," she encouraged him. "You will be here for years. And one day I shall tell you that I am free."

He smiled wanly, his eyes fixed upon the tree outside the window, that the first cold wind, herald of the autumn, was shaking and stripping.

"Can't we do without Alexander and all the rest of them?" he said.

"No—I have told you before. At least—not yet."

He clung to that. "Later, perhaps?" he pressed. "Perhaps."

Lounging over to the mantelpiece, he picked up the Diana he had given her two years ago.

"I hate this thing," he said, moodily handling and eyeing it.

"It is a good piece of work. You chose well."

"Too well."

She looked at him curiously. "What do you mean?"

"It symbolises all that I do not understand in you—everything that eludes me."

She was silent for a moment, then quietly diverted the stream of talk to other channels.

"How do you find Savary?" she enquired.

"Vulgar and pretentious—as I imagine his master is."

"You remember," she mused, "what Mourakin said here once—soon after you came back—that Russia would declare war against England?"

Norton did remember that. "That was what Mourakin wished—not what he thought," he said.

"Then you don't believe that—supposing word came from Bonaparte that Russia *was* to declare war against England—you don't believe she would?"

Norton replaced the Diana upon the mantelpiece with a show of elaborate care.

"No," he said firmly, "I—don't—believe—she would. . . ."

§ XIII

Russia declared war upon England on October 31st, 1807. This is an historical fact, though not a particularly important one. The alliance with France was a mere episode, as things turned out. And in the end the Czar was acclaimed as the foremost deliverer of Europe

from the heel of the Corsican. But at the time, it did not seem unimportant or episodic. It seemed, in fact, to be the last and decisive blow, the *coup de grâce* to the stubborn arrogance of England.

At the Embassy, hints were not wanting. Coming events, more than customarily, cast their shadows before. Willy, gleaning odds and ends in the many hospitable houses to which an increasing sociability led him, brought back sheaves of rumours to the Lord. It was, however, a thankless task. The Lord laughed at him for his pains, ignored his drawing-room diplomacy, told him in so many words that he had dreamt his tales lying abed in the morning when he should have been out riding.

Willy retired discomfited. He did not understand the Lord in these days. It was not exactly that the Lord was soured or definitely disagreeable to live with. But you could not depend upon him. Moodiness, fits of abstraction, a disinclination to attend very seriously to the work of the Embassy, were constantly in evidence. And he looked older. He looked forty, if a day. There were lines about his eyes and mouth that had not been there when he came from Tilsit.

And then the day arrived when Willy had the consolation (albeit a cold one, for he was fond of Petersburg) of having been right. The gathering rumours drew together and became a sober, authentic, irrefutable fact. Russia declared war against England.

In the hour of his vindication, Willy judiciously withdrew from the sight of his master. He had the wisdom to know that to have been right is very often the gravest kind of misdemeanour. Through the floor of his room he could hear the Lord pacing slowly up and down his study. There was a board that creaked

when it was stepped on, and this evening it creaked every two minutes. The thick carpet covered the rest.

That was seven o'clock. Dinner was over. The Lord was due to go to the Schulenberg reception. Willy glanced out of the open window of his room. Yes, the carriage was there, the horses waiting. And still the creak of the loose board went on and on.

Quite suddenly a door slammed. The Lord appeared to come upstairs to his bedroom. Then, a few moments later, his footsteps could be heard descending to the hall again. The front door opened. Somebody—presumably the Lord—went out.

Willy peered out again. . . . The Lord, going to his reception at last. The tall figure in its furred cloak stood motionless for an instant upon the Embassy steps, then, with a word to the coachman, entered the carriage and was driven off.

The Lord's voice habitually carried well. It was deep-chested, easy, like a good actor's. And the Lord was not a man to speak *sotto voce* very much. So that Willy heard quite plainly, without the least imputation of eavesdropping, what, indeed, he had half expected to hear—that the Lord was driving, not to the Schulenberg reception, not in fact to any reception whatsoever, but to the house of the Princess Barbarov by the Taurid Gardens. . . .

§ XIV

She was in her usual chair, by the window, alone, quiescent, enjoying the benediction of the dusk.

"I did not expect you to-night," she said. "I thought you were going to Count Schulenberg's." Then, seeing how grave his eyes were: "What is the matter, Norton? What is it?"

He sank into a chair near her.

"Mourakin has the last laugh," he said.

A strange look, as of a wild thing brought to bay, passed across her face.

"You mean——?"

"It is war."

She half rose from the long chair, then fell back again.

"But you *told* me—you *told* me there would be no war with England!" There were tears in her voice. It was like the voice of a child at the discovery that parents are fallible and that their word is not the rock on which life is founded.

"I told you I did not believe there could be war," he answered her quietly. "I was wrong, you see."

She gazed out unhappily at the deepening twilight. Neither spoke. A servant brought candles and retreated, ignored by the two motionless figures under the window. From some neighbouring building, a bell tolled mournfully. Somebody mounted the front steps and knocked, and a few minutes later, another servant appeared.

"Count Mourakin," he announced.

The silence continued for another minute, then Natalya said:

"Tell Count Mourakin I am unwell. I cannot see anybody this evening."

The servant retired. Presently they heard him close the front door. The silence, dominated by the tolling of the bell, the blue dusk, the pale gold candle-light, remained.

Neither concealed, or attempted to conceal, from the other, the imminence of their crisis. This, at last, was

the Rubicon, the ancient dividing-line, the test of courage and of purpose from one generation to another.

Norton cleared his throat. Without looking at her, "You realise what this means," he said.

A fluttering sigh, almost a sob, broke from her lips. He could barely catch her whispered, "Yes."

"I must leave Petersburg at once."

"Yes."

"You see how futile it was to trust your precious Alexander," he said bitterly. "He listened to you and smiled and made half-promises, and all the time he knew he was going to smash us—like this."

He began to pace up and down the room, as an hour ago he had paced the floor of his study at the Embassy.

"Smash us," he repeated, bringing his fist down into his left palm with a violent gesture. "He had made up his mind—all that time ago. No wonder he put you off. . . ."

He swung round. "Natasha—darling——"

"No, no, you must not——"

"I will call you what I like—what I feel. . . . Can't you possibly get your divorce without all this? Don't you know someone in the Church who can get it done for you? Isn't there *any* way?"

She shook her head. "No. There is no other way."

"Then, my dear, for the last time, won't you come away with me—to Italy—anywhere you please——?"

He strode over to where she sat and knelt down on the carpet beside her.

"On my knees," he said, "on my knees, you see, Natasha."

She looked at him in wonder. How different he was, now, from the beautiful conquering young Englishman who had first come to this room in 1805, that

perfect type of the English grand seigneur, to whom self-control, poise, phlegm, are the cardinal virtues of life! Her eyes filled slowly with tears. Before she realised it, she was crying.

He waited, patiently there upon his knees beside her chair, until the storm of weeping had passed over her. It was a solemn experience, that made his heart ache with a well-nigh physical pain. He had never seen her cry before. He had not really believed, perhaps, that her shadowy personality carried within itself the fount of human tears.

When she had finished and had dried her eyes:

"Well, Natasha?" he said, humbly.

A shudder convulsed her. "Don't make me," she pleaded, her head turned towards the window.

He did not understand at first. "Don't make you what, Natasha?" he asked her, in gentle puzzled tones.

"Make me—refuse you——"

"You mean—you won't come?"

"I *can't*, Norton!"

He closed his eyes involuntarily. Defeat, like a tremendous wave, passed over him, blinding, deafening, choking. The world collapsed in ruins—that world he had planned for them both, back in England by the fire at Great Stanhope Street, so many, many times. . . .

"Why?" he said at last.

"I should not be happy—— You see, I don't love you like that, Norton. Perhaps I don't love anyone like that. I broke Barbarov's heart. He wasn't a bad man then. Somehow I couldn't, *couldn't*, let him touch me. Some women—one or two here and there—are like that. . . . And then Mourakin. He is eating his heart out too. One can't help knowing it. I'm sorry for him, but nothing else. I couldn't give him what he wants.

. . . Oh, I know you think I do it all to flaunt my power, you think I am cold and heartless and like to see men suffer. That is what people say. But it isn't true, Norton! It isn't true!"

Quietly, as though from utter weariness, he laid his head in her lap, his arm encircling her knees. His eyes were open, miserably fixed in a sort of fascination upon the bosom of her gown, where the white throat and neck fell towards the firm white breasts. Gradually, the crazy edifice of hope which he had built in his heart all these past months, tumbled to the ground. Brick by brick, until it was levelled, until nothing but rubble, nothing but débris and disillusion remained. . . . Here, in her room, with his head intimately laid upon her body, he gave up once for all his dream of making her his own. It was like the dentist's tug at a decaying tooth. It made him sick and dizzy with agony. But it was necessary to endure. . . . In the recesses of his mind, now that everything was at an end, he knew what he might have known from the first—that he had been fighting so desperately, not against the Czar, not against Natalya's religion or her love of country or her aversion from sexual relations, not against his own bad reputation, not against the memory of the night when he had almost taken her against her will. . . . Fundamentally, he had been fighting her inborn, racial indecisiveness, those fatal acquiescences that marked every corner of her house, every facet of her character. It was Russia that he fought—Russia, half mystical, half child-like, indolent, obstinate, innocent, a wanderer forever along dim and alien roads. . . .

By degrees, his past, his sense of seamliness, his Fitzwarren devotion to the customary and the accepted, brought him to his feet. He walked over to the fire-

place and, from there, surveyed the picture of Natalya by the window. It seemed to be another, not he, who had knelt there, clasping her knees, his head pillowed in her lap. . . . It was like play-acting. He ought not to have let himself go in that way. It should not, he promised himself, occur again.

Going slowly back to her side:

"I will leave you now," he said.

Her great, tear-stained eyes looked up at him as if asking for forgiveness.

"I shall see you again?"

"No. I shall not come again."

She bent her head.

"We must not forget one another, Natasha. We must remember that we have been very happy together."

"And—very unhappy—too."

"Yes, that too." He paused. "If you should change your mind," he added, "I shall be at the Embassy for two or three days longer."

It was a lonely final firework, that last reminder, shot into the dark sky as the ship was going down.

For a moment longer he stayed, half-hoping, beside her, then, as no response came, raised her hand to his lips with formal courtesy. . . .

Outside in the street his carriage was waiting.

"Drive to Count Schulenberg's," he said.

He got in. The coachman spoke to the horses. The wheels revolved, the carriage rattled up the street and round the corner. In a little while the house by the Taurid Gardens was left far behind.

CHAPTER VI

BEGINNING AGAIN

§ I

RICHBURY, the Duke of Belgravia's seat in Derbyshire, lies in a valley watered by the Derwent. It is symmetrical, magnificent, vast. Its proportions are perfect; its environs are faultless; every foot of it bears the stamp of its own ducal race—a stately calm, a cool unhurried courtesy, an air of commanding rank, implicit, never insisted on.

Immediately around it are the grounds, the deer-park, the village populated by servants of the estate. Beyond these, for many miles around, rises and falls the landscape of that part of Derbyshire—a clean-cut landscape of long green sloping fields, white unmortared stone walls, solid grey farmhouses each with its own clump of trees around the barns, its cattle, its numberless chickens. And always, the background of every landscape, a line of distant wooded hills shuts out the next valley and the outside world.

Anne Caversham came to Richbury every August, when the London season was over. She came at other times, too, if the mood was upon her, or when some sudden impulse drove her from London. Like her mother, the Beautiful Duchess, she was very much a law unto herself, though in a strikingly different fashion. There had never been much sympathy between the celebrated erratic Duchess and her daughters. She had been a reigning beauty, and neither of her girls could boast of even average good looks. She had been

vividly emotional, gushing, spasmodically affectionate, perpetually insincere—a turbulent shallow stream, careering along the rocky course of her follies and her indiscretions in the sunshine of wealth and prosperity and self-indulgence—brilliant, glittering, fundamentally unimportant. And the Caversham daughters, quite patently, were none of these things, and never would be.

Of the two girls, Georgiana had married Morval—years ago now it seemed. She was commonplace, a good wife, a good mother, content to obey her husband in public and to govern him in private. Her one romance, when she had run away from home and Morval had found her in the Park, still soared splendidly above the daily placidities of her existence—a central sanctity, isolated, imperishable, the beacon fire of her life.

The sisters were devoted to each other, as children may be who do not vie particularly for the favours of their parents. And when the Duchess died, and things grew difficult for Anne, the Morvals' house was a refuge always to be counted on, a kindly and unpretentious sanctuary. The Duke hardly knew his daughters, and his mistress, Lady Sophia Frome, who now ruled all things in Belgravia House, disliked them. So that Anne generally endeavoured to be where Lady Sophia was not. Sometimes this led her to the Morvals'. At other times, it brought her to Richbury.

At this time of the year the Duke and Lady Sophia would normally have been at Richbury, in the country. But the Duke was laid up in London with gout; and Lady Sophia, unwilling to risk losing the ultimate benefits of her complaisance—or so much of them as the entail permitted—stayed by his side, a ministering angel. . . .

To Anne Caversham, the comparative solitude of life in the lonely palace was far from oppressive. She had her pianoforte, her harp, plenty of music; there were always books; there were always peace, elegance, the loveliness of surroundings created by endless wealth and perfect taste.

There were callers, too, to vary what might have been monotony. When you did not feel like playing or reading, and had nothing else to do, it was quite amusing to talk to callers—to let them talk, rather, to sit back and lead them on, observing their individual fatuities, watching the play of their minds, enjoying, in a quiet way, the comic spectacle of the surface of life. You were gravely polite, of course, and said the right things at the right places. And the callers went away and said what a pleasant girl you really were, and what a pity it was you were plain and so very unlikely to marry.

On fine mornings there was nearly always a ride over the country. Anne always rode alone, quite fearlessly. For one thing, Boreland—so called, ironically, by reference to the cautious politician of that name—was capable of greater speed, when called upon, than any horse in Derbyshire. His parentage was a little mysterious, his coat definitely piebald. The Duke, seeing him once in the stable, demanded with as much heat as a Caversham is capable of how “that damned circus pony” had got in. He wanted to have it removed forthwith. Anne, however, had her way in that matter. The Duke was constitutionally too lazy and indifferent to insist upon anything, and Boreland accordingly remained in the Richbury stables.

Apart from the fleetness of Boreland, Anne had other reasons for feeling safe. She was familiar with every

inch of the country. And every man she met was her father's man—his servant or his tenant or his tenant's servant. They all knew her as she passed along the roads and pathways on the piebald horse. They would have torn to pieces the stranger who dared to lay a finger upon her. . . .

This September morning she rode out towards Brown Dale, over the park, through little grey villages, mellow and weathered, descending at last into the Dale by a steep and winding path where Boreland slipped and slithered wildly but never allowed his rider to feel that he had lost command of the situation.

Turning to the right at the foot of the hill, they went slowly up the Dale. It was very still down there. On either side high wooded banks rose precipitously, seamed here and there by the relics of ancient mines. The stream that in winter dashed torrentially along the valley was dried up by the summer's drought, save for a few pools of stagnant water above the weirs. The quiet, steady sunshine filled the place with drowsy peace, from which all but vegetable life seemed to have departed. Herself, Boreland, a bee or so, a few scuttling rabbits, a child in the doorway of a game-keeper's cottage, a rat sitting quietly on a stone by the main weir, apparently cleaning its face—these were the sole representatives of all other forms of life.

At the end of a beech-wood the Dale opened out into a green rocky space, almost a natural amphitheatre. A ruined mill, with grass and weeds flourishing in the wheel, its race quite dry and full of stones, stood by the river-bed. To the right, where there had been quarrying in the past, the trees were gone. A desolate, forgotten spot that Anne often visited. As a child,

the roofless mill had frightened her. Now it was an old friend. Nobody knew much about it, except that it had been in its present state for many years. Somewhere, no doubt, it concealed a history. A minor tragedy, some long obliterated episode, had its memorial in the poor little ruin.

Jumping down from the saddle, she picked some of the purplish flowers that grew round the wall. She generally did this, when the flowers were out, though she would have found it difficult to assign a reason for the practice. Perhaps it was because they were such homely, humble flowers, so different from the imperial blooms that the gardeners at Richbury produced. In the autumn, particularly, when they were seeding into woolly, clinging strands, they had an especial charm. The sadness of grey lives, of unfulfilment, seemed to lie in those purplish masses of common wayside blooms. Possibly, though, they were not really wild flowers. It might be that they grew where once there had been a garden. She did not know. She did not even know their name. And it was, in any case, she told herself severely, a mere sentimental habit that made her stop and pick them at all. She would not have cared for some of her London friends—the people who admired her calm, dispassionate intellectuality—to know that she gave way to such romantic moments. . . .

Boreland, cropping the short grass, looked up and stared fixedly towards the head of the Dale. She followed his gaze. Someone was coming. There, picking a careful way over the rocks and among the bushes that cumbered that end of the valley, a big man on an almost black horse was riding towards them. He appeared not to have seen them yet, intent as he must have been on the difficulties of the path.

Instinctively she mounted Boreland again and stayed for a moment waiting in the shadow of the ruined wall. There was something vaguely familiar about the man, but she could not definitely place him. He was still picking his way among the brambles and his head was lowered.

Then, at last, he was at the end of the rough path. The black came trotting thankfully over the even floor of the amphitheatre towards the mill. Anne felt the man's eyes upon her and told Boreland to go forward. Even then, she could not distinguish the stranger's features, because of the strong sun in her eyes.

He drew level, glanced across at her and reined in the black. At the same moment, she recognized him.

"Lord Norton, surely," she said.

He smiled. It was the famous, the authentic smile.

"Very odd," he replied in the deep, pleasant voice she remembered, "meeting you here like this—Lady Anne. . . ."

§ II

That was what she noticed first—his calling her "Lady Anne." Always, before, it had been merely Anne, casually, *de haut en bas*. For years and years, she had been used to seeing him at Belgravia House, at Mortlake, sometimes at Cavendish Square or at Lady Mauldeth's in Whitehall. She had been quite a little girl when first she came to the realisation that he and Lady Sheen, her aunt, "meant something" to one another. That had been a revelation, the food for much adolescent thought. Aunts, after all, are aunts. One does not normally consider them in connection with ideas of passion, of high romance and worlds well lost for love. . . .

Smiling back at him, she replied:

"I often come here, when I am at Richbury. I always think it is one of the loveliest places in the county."

He nodded slowly. "I was never here before. I wandered in by accident at the other end. I thought I should have to go back once or twice—it was so rough."

"The rest is easy. . . . Which way were you going?"

"No particular way."

She glanced at him casually. He looked brown and healthy, like some vigorous gentleman farmer. Only his eyes seemed to be restless, unhappy. And now that she saw him closer, the famous smile, that had been sufficient unto itself for so long was subtly tinged with pain.

"You're staying somewhere round here, I suppose," she suggested.

He mentioned a good inn at the nearest small town. "I've been there about a week. I don't stop long at one place."

"I see. I thought you would possibly be with friends." His odd manner rather embarrassed her; yet she felt sorry for him. "Come over and see me at Richbury before you go," she added.

"Thank you. I don't go in for parties very much now, though."

"There is no party this year."

He appeared to ponder this. "How is the Duke?" he enquired at length.

"Gouty. He hasn't left London yet."

"I'm sorry. . . . Then—you're alone at Richbury?"

"Yes."

"You are careless of your reputation, Lady Anne," he said, gently.

She laughed. "Still a flatterer, I see," she replied. "What do you mean?"

"I have always understood that my reputation was protected by the sort of face God saw fit to give me."

He looked across at her with quiet gravity, as though he were considering for the first time the inadequacies of her features. "Nonsense, Anne," he protested. "Besides, you have a good shape—slender and supple. You wear your clothes well."

She bowed quizzically. "You are very kind, Lord Norton."

"I'm afraid I forget that you're not still a little girl," he said, stroking the black's sleek coat. "I ought not to talk to you like this. But we're old friends. And it is so nice to meet an old friend unexpectedly. At least, it is to me."

A thought occurred to her. "You weren't in London all last season, were you?"

He replied, perfunctorily, "No," adding: "Were you?"

"Yes. I had a full season. The Duke thought it was necessary. My aunt Sheen took me round. The blind leading the blind, perhaps. . . . Don't you think it a quaint custom, this chaperoning of would-be-brides?"

He did not reply. She perceived that, to his mind, the custom was not quaint, for the simple reason that it was a custom and therefore taken for granted by all right-thinking people.

"I mean," she explained, "a girl gets driven to the season like a young cow going to market. She is hawked round the various places where eligible men are likely to be, until a buyer turns up. Then, if nobody wants her, she has to be driven back home again."

"What nonsense you talk!" he remarked evenly.

"It's quite true."

He ignored that. "By the way, did you—were you

She helped him out. "I was driven back home again.

"You see," she added, "I'm not the type there's a rush for."

A lark, poised in mid-air, began to sing. The black pawed nervously. From the fields of Brown Low, far above them, a man's shout came faintly to their ears.

"Which way are you going back?" he asked her.

"The way I came. The head of the Dale is too full of thorns for my liking. I go through sometimes but I always leave half my skirt behind on the bushes."

He agreed that it was a bad bit to negotiate. "Do you mind if I go on with you?" he asked diffidently.

This, from the once conquering Lord Norton Fitzwarren, to an ugly duckling like herself, was distinctly funny. Anne nearly laughed aloud. Still, his humility genuinely touched her.

"That would be very pleasant," she said.

They moved off slowly, under the sun-drenched foliage of the beeches.

"I love beech-woods," he told her.

Anne said, Yes, so did she.

"Did you ever see those at Longstone?"

"No. I don't know Trentshire at all."

Conversation languished. At length Anne said:

"How long have you been back from Russia?" She did not really want to know, but it seemed a safe, polite opening.

He replied, without looking at her: "I came back last January."

"You liked Petersburg?"

"No."

"You wouldn't like to go there again?"

"No."

Anne gazed up through the swimming green of the leaves. She had clearly chosen the wrong topic. Of course, now that she remembered it, there was that old story about a Princess Something-or-other that she ought to have avoided. She decided to abandon that particular field.

"I should hate to have to live abroad," she said, beating an orderly retreat. "I went to Italy once—with mother, long ago. I remember how I longed and longed for home. I made myself a positive nuisance to everybody."

He smiled, as if to himself. "You love England, do you?" he said.

Again she almost laughed. That was precisely what she had been trying to tell him. How thick-headed most men were!

Aloud, she replied:

"Yes, I love England. Especially English country life."

He gave her a warm look. "There's nothing quite like it anywhere, is there?"

"I don't know. I shouldn't think so."

"There is nothing like it," he repeated. "Nothing anywhere. I've been all over Europe——"

He tailed off, musing silently, his eyes fixed upon the path.

"Of course, I love London too," she said.

"Yes, London can be very pleasant—especially when you are young. . . . But London can hurt too. London can be very treacherous. It is a bad place when you are—out of suits with fortune."

The last words came rather unexpectedly. They were not, she considered, the words such a man would normally use.

"You read Shakespeare?" she said.

"Not very much. Why?"

"Only that you quoted him very naturally just now—as though you knew him well."

"Did I?" He smiled. "That was your Aunt, I expect, Anne. I learned most of the good things I do from her."

"Yes. She is a dear soul, isn't she?"

"The greatest-hearted woman I ever knew. And the cleverest."

They rode on in silence until they reached the foot of the hill leading out of the Dale.

"Better walk them up here," she said. "Boreland couldn't tackle it with me on his back."

"What do you call him? Boreland?"

"Yes." She explained briefly why. "Of course I never knew Mr. Boreland well," she added. "Only his reputation."

"I knew both. Boreland was at Oxford with me. Trevivian was there too—and Flanders and Morval. We had a sort of club. You know the kind of thing—put new life into politics—regenerate the world and so forth. . . . And now look at us."

He dismounted. The strong grasp of his hand, as he helped her down, was very masculine—very indifferent, too, she had to admit.

"You haven't done so badly," she said, as they walked uphill.

"Who? Myself, do you mean?"

"All of you."

He shrugged. "Trevivian has done well, I suppose.

A man with a single idea generally does. But he's insatiably ambitious, you know. Reckless, too—he used to gamble tremendously at Oxford. And he makes enemies easily. There are scores of them about—waiting for him to make a mistake. When he does, they won't let him off." He slashed at a nettle with his whip. "The rest of us—just the usual sort of weeds. Boreland plods along, in his way. But you wouldn't call him important. Flanders gave up everything for a woman who leads him a dog's life. And Morval——"

"You must not say anything against Morval," she interrupted. "I like Morval. He's kind—and sincere."

"I know. But he'll never do anything."

"He's a good husband and a good father."

"Of course. But that's not *doing*."

"It's *being*. That's better."

He regarded her humorously. "I never thought you were moral, Anne."

"Nor am I. But I do get sick of hearing people sneered at because they're just quiet, good sort of men and women, not brilliant or successful but *good*. . . . You know the kind of home I was brought up in, don't you? You know—everything that went on there. Oh, I'm not blaming my parents. They were what circumstances made them. But it wasn't much of a home for children to grow up in. . . . Cards, dinners, balls, wit and laughter and heart-break. Never any quietness, never any real peace, no simplicity, no time for the wants of little children. . . . You think I'm hard, I suppose. Most people do. And I am, too. You couldn't be born into that house without being hard. . . . I always made up my mind, though, that if ever I had a home of my own, it should be a *real* home. . . . Of course, I like London and clever people and good talk.

But I hate all the looseness and the gossip, the squabbling for influence, the intrigues and pettiness and—all the rest. I've seen so much of it. . . ." She paused abruptly. "I'm sorry. I'm afraid my tongue ran away with me."

They were half way up. He halted at a bend in the road and bared his head. The sun turned his thick fair hair to gold.

"Why do you say all this to me?" he asked.

"I don't know. . . . I ought not to have. I'm sorry."

"No. Don't be sorry."

"You forgive me?"

"I am very grateful. Nobody has confided much in me—for a long time. I'm rather a lonely person, you see. . . . Besides, I think you're right."

She turned towards him incredulously. "*You—you* think all that too?"

"Yes. Why not?"

"Well, because——"

The search for gentle words to clothe her thought embarrassed her. "I always thought you belonged to—that kind of life," she said at last.

"So I did."

"I see. And—you don't—any longer?"

He shook his head slowly. "We all grow up sooner or later, Anne. Things happen to us. We get knocks that send us reeling into the ditch. And for a while we lie there, among the dust and the nettles, and long for somebody to come along and put an end to us. . . . Until one day we pick ourselves up and move on——"

She listened, gazing out across the low stone wall, over the sloping grass of the hillside. It was rather

awful and solemn to be the repository of this man's confidences—this perfect type of the formal, punctilious Englishman. Of course she had asked for it, in a way. She had committed that outburst about her childhood. But she hadn't expected an exchange like this.

Without looking at him: "So you have—picked yourself up?"

"Not exactly. . . . Perhaps I'm just beginning to consider it. I'm feeling the cramp."

She frowned at a distant line of hills. "I'm afraid we're talking very sentimentally," she said.

"I don't care."

"Nor I, really. . . . Were you—badly hurt—when you were knocked into the ditch?"

He was pretending to examine the girths of his saddle and she heard him mutter "Badly hurt", as though to himself; then, with a trace of bitterness, "Badly—damned badly——"

They walked on together, to the top of the hill.

§ III

After that first meeting by the ruined mill in Brown Dale, Norton saw Anne Caversham fairly often. Once or twice, for the sake of appearances, he paid a ceremonious call at Richbury. Custom, decency, demanded that. But generally they contrived merely to let each other know where they *might* be found riding at various sufficiently clearly stated hours in the near future. The illusion of the fortuitous and the avenue of escape were in this manner preserved.

He stayed on at his inn well into October. It was comfortable. He liked the neighbourhood. And—he could not deceive himself—he derived much solid,

quiet satisfaction from his "chance" meetings with Anne. It was long since he had achieved anything so nearly approaching a *pied à terre*.

The girl was very intelligent. There was no doubt about that. Plain, too, of course. But she was plain in a cultured, lordly fashion. She wore her unattractiveness like a simple, suitable garment, well-cut, expensive and her own. Breeding, an air of nobility, a nature in which the bizarre and the incomprehensible had not the slightest part: these were a rich compensation. And she was, after all, one of his own people, another twig on the English ruling family tree. They understood one another. It soothed him to be with her, listening to her amusing, sensible talk, telling her the things that were in his own mind.

She was young, too. Almost of another generation. The women in his life were all considerably her elders—all except one. That one had been young, so far as years went. But really Natalya had been timeless, neither young nor old. She did not enter the lists with other women. . . . It was, he reflected, as he lounged smoking on the little balcony outside his room at the inn, of real importance that Anne was so young, so dissociated from his past. With a girl like that one might begin all over again—rule a straight line across the page and start anew. . . . The smoke of his pipe curled into the quiet golden air. He felt peaceful, almost happy. Smoking was vulgar, of course. But all the same it was a great help, a good friend. And up here nobody who knew him was likely to see.

An empty wagon came trundling across the little square on its way up to some hill-farm. Outside a shop a group of people clustered at the rite of gossip. The sunset, slanting through the lofty trees beyond

the town bridge, flooded the grey house-fronts with light and colour. . . .

His thought wandered to the memory of another sunset—a long sunset that had streamed across the roofs of Petersburg, into that window where *she* sat, in the familiar reclining-chair, her upraised face pale gold like some lifeless, shining bust. . . . Where was she now? Did she still sit by the window? Did Mourakin call, and the others, as on so many evenings of the past?

He did not know. He could even think of it all these last few weeks without feeling miserable and hopeless and suicidal. At first, it had been all black—never a gleam of light anywhere. That endless journey back through Sweden, then, at long last, the streets of London. Trevivian had been almost cool with him. He had said very little, of course, but it had been quite, quite clear that he thought Norton should have been able to avert a declaration of war on the part of Russia—should, at least, have parried the thrust for the time being. Norton had been on the spot—he should have known how things were going. He could at any rate have sent home a warning. . . . All, naturally, wrapped up in phrases that did not hurt. But it was easy enough to see through the wrappings, easy enough to feel the shape of the whip beneath.

Other people hadn't been so considerate. Goward, who was in town just then, said:

"I can't help thinking, Norton——" He had paused importantly, before he proceeded, at some length, to tell Norton what it was that he couldn't help thinking. In Goward's estimation, Norton had added no lustre to the name of Fitzwarren. On the contrary, he had gone far to make of it a byword and a

scoff. Especially, Norton gathered, a scoff. It was all very disagreeable for Goward—disagreeable to have to say these things, disagreeable to hear other people saying them. About *his* brother. That was the real point. . . . Goward waded sturdily into the deep waters of his favourite topic:

“We Fitzwarrens—we Fitzwarrens have a great responsibility, a great place in the world. And in all the circumstances, this being so——”

They were in Goward's study at Whitehall, Norton sitting in a chair near the open door, Goward on his legs by the window, his back turned to the room and to his peccant brother. Goward seemed to be enjoying himself. His words flowed easily. His eye, for the better concentration of his ideas, was fixed in a frown upon the house opposite. . . . Very quietly, so as not to disturb him, Norton had risen from the chair and slipped out. The peroration followed him faintly along the passage until the increasing distance shut it off altogether.

He left London that evening. And Goward hadn't written. That, at least, was satisfactory. . . .

Since then he had been wandering about, rather in the manner of the time that had followed his first return from Russia, except that now, instead of going to houses and people he knew, he avoided them. He wanted to be quite alone. Even Sacks was left behind at Great Stanhope Street. Sacks had been as puzzled and crestfallen over it as a dog whose master goes for a walk without him. He pointed out the various hardships incidental to travelling alone. Lord Norton would have nobody to see that he had a regular supply of clean linen, nobody to shave him, no one to brush his clothes.

Norton told him that he was going, if necessary, to wear dirty shirts and grow a beard, but that he was determined to travel alone. And in due course, quietly, almost furtively, he set out.

When he reached a place where he was likely to stay for more than a day or two he sent to Great Stanhope Street for letters. There were not many. His agent and Lady Sheen were the only regular correspondents. From Russia, nothing came at all—not a single line to tell him that *she* was still alive. He had impressed it upon Sacks, before he left, that any letter from Russia must be sent forward, without fail, immediately upon receipt. But so far nothing had come. He had not yet resigned himself to the belief that nothing ever would come, but he went through the letters each time with less hope in his heart. . . .

Up on the balcony at the inn it was growing chilly. The sun had dipped behind the trees, the house-fronts were no longer gay with colour. Norton yawned, stretched, looked at his watch. . . . Nearly time for the mail coach from London. He would wait for that and then he would go in and read until bedtime.

His pipe was cold. Across his shoulders, like a nervous shudder of anticipation, a trembling passed. . . . Anticipation—of what? What was there left for him—a failure, finished, done for? The reflection, in an odd way, comforted him. To be out of the running, to give up all your dreams, all your ambitions, to vegetate, to enjoy your pipe, your evening book, your bed—it was simple and it was satisfying. He had tried the other sort of life and it hadn't been a success. . . . Well, he had enough and more than enough to live on. His tastes, now that he no longer gambled, were inexpensive. Queer, the way Lady Sheen had always warned him

against gambling. She had been right, too, though not in the way she had intended. He had gambled with his own happiness. Everything, every hope that made a part of his dream of a full and happy life had gone on that one throw. He had plunged and lost. And nothing that happened now could ever alter that.

The sound of a horn, blown somewhere beyond the town bridge, faintly reached his ear. A few moments later the mail coach, on time to the second, swept imposingly into the square, pulling up under the balcony. The quiet place was transformed. Men appeared with fresh horses, others with beer. A passenger alighted. The mail for the town was disgorged. Everybody shouted, gave orders and hurled facetious remarks at individuals apparently named George, Sam and Curly. A cheerful five-minute pandemonium reigned boisterously, then all of a sudden was gone again. The clatter of hoofs, the note of the horn, echoed away along the road to the North. Peace, the peace of rusticity, the blessed peace of stagnation, flowed back into its own.

Over by the little shops the moon was rising, the swollen, opulent moon of autumn, lovely and unattainable by children and men. Loneliness, the sense of frustration, trickled insidiously into his heart. Knocking out the ashes of the pipe, he went back to his room, where there was a fire, a bottle of wine on the table and a book to read.

As he settled himself in his chair, a knock came at the door. The landlord appeared.

"A visitor to see you, my lord," he announced.

Norton frowned. The man must be mistaken.

"To see *me*? Are you sure?"

"Quite sure, my lord."

"What name?"

"A Mr. Sacks, my lord. He said he was your lordship's servant."

Sacks? Had Sacks disobeyed, after all?

"Send him up," he said, grimly.

But Sacks was just behind the landlord, and entered almost at once, half-sheepish, half-defiant, bearing a large parcel, which he deposited upon the table.

Norton eyed him curiously. "Well, Sacks? What does this mean?"

"I'm sorry if I did wrong, my lord——"

"Never mind that. . . . Were you the passenger who got out of the coach?"

"Yes, my lord."

"I didn't recognize you in the dusk. . . . Well, what damned trouble have you brought me now?"

"This, my lord." Sacks laid his hand dramatically on the battered parcel lying upon the table. "Russia, sir," he added. "Russia—at last."

"I told you to *send* anything on."

"Only letters, sir. This was a parcel. You never mentioned parcels."

Norton gave in. "Go and get yourself a wash and a square meal," he said.

"Thank you, my lord."

Sacks marched out. He had the air of an intrepid soldier who has brought news of relief through the very jaws of death to some beleaguered garrison. . . .

Immediately he was gone Norton rose. There it lay before him on the table, the first token of her remembering him. The writing of the address was not hers—probably the demoiselle had wrapped the parcel for her. But he could not doubt its origin. His heart, stronger than his training, beat a little faster.

The parcel was well packed. For five minutes he worked at it, cutting cords, unwrapping paper—all very carefully, lest he should accidentally throw away some message, put in at the last moment, some significant slip of paper containing words that would tell him what in spite of all he still hoped he might hear. The old anxieties, the heartache, the indecision, all the *malaise* of infatuation, began to steal upon him. He felt physically sick. . . .

At last it was finished. The contents were in two boxes. One, the smaller, revealed a packet of letters. The other held the white marble Diana!

He looked over the letters, meticulously, one by one. They were all his own. Most of them he had written from Great Stanhope Street, one or two from the Embassy—mere notes these last, about receptions and the like. . . . So she had kept them all, every little ephemeral word he had written to her—only to return them in the end like this, without a line of explanation. . . . And the Diana. That had come back too. Cold, faultless, her scanty draperies billowing out behind her as she ran, the Diana had come back to him intact, just as he had bought her. Not a chip, not a tiny crack was visible, to mar the perfect surface. Her long journey across Europe, in the midst of wars and tumults, had left her unscathed.

He sat back in his chair. After all, there *was* a message, over there on the table. Nothing written, nothing he could reply to. But she had sent him back everything that had come from him. She would have nothing about her that might remind her of what had happened between them. The episode, she said more plainly than words could have done, was finished.

He closed his eyes, the better to see the pictures that haunted his mind: Petersburg that first winter; the Swedish Ambassador's ball; the country house; Natalya at the piano, playing an old French song; Natalya in her carriage, the sunshine dappling her pale skin with gold; Natalya's deep eyes, where he had looked his life away. . . .

The fire had burned down to a clear glowing mass. He went back to the table, picked up his old letters again and standing by the mantelpiece read them through. So clearly, the old fears and desires came back to him, the detail of the rooms in which he had written the letters, the petty incidents with which their writing was linked up in his mind. . . . The past, that never, never died!

One of the letters slipped from his hand, down on to the glowing mass of the fire. In an instant it was a black, shiny cinder. . . . Had he, he asked himself, done that on purpose. Hardly that. He had, perhaps, held the letter a little too lightly. That was all. Fate had swept it inwards on to the flames. Fate. . . .

Well—so be it!

Stooping, he placed the rest of the letters solemnly upon the charred remains of their fellow. The flames bit, licked over them, then the whole funeral pile flared grandly for a minute up the chimney.

On the table the white marble Diana awaited what fate should befall her. Proud, chaste, indifferent, her perfect limbs untouched, she filled him with admiration and annoyance. He had a surging impulse to humiliate her, to drag her through the mire of gross and earthy contacts. That passed, and he felt only a vague, fastidious perplexity regarding her. He could not keep her about him. She must go where he would never

see her again. And yet, somehow, the thought of exposing her for sale, the idea of dealers' hands pawing those dainty limbs, revolted him.

There was a familiar rap at the door—Sacks' rap. "Come in," Norton said.

Sacks came in. His eyes roved quickly round the room, took in the piles of paper, the boxes, the cord, came to rest at length upon the white marble figure on the table.

"Anything you'd like, my lord?"

"No, Sacks."

"I might go through your things, perhaps? So that I could see what you needed to be sent on, sir."

"As you like. The girl here has done my washing lately."

"So she told me, sir. . . . A very good place, in a small way, my lord, I should say this is." He paused, eyed the Diana again and ventured a familiarity: "Not going back to Russia, are we, my lord?"

Norton looked at him for a long minute. At length

"No, Sacks," he said, "we are not. . . ."

There followed a silence, vaguely uncomfortable and oppressive. Sacks broke it with a ceremonious cough.

"Well, sir, if you don't want me, I'll be getting to bed. I'm catching the coach early to-morrow morning."

"Very well. Good-night, Sacks." Then, as the door was almost shut: "Sacks—one moment!"

Sacks reappeared.

"You needn't go on that coach to-morrow morning."

"No, sir."

"You can stay till the day after."

"Yes, my lord."

"You see, Sacks, I've decided—the day after to-morrow—to go back to London myself."

"Very good, sir." Sacks was manifestly delighted. Had he possessed a tail, he would have wagged it. As it was he merely added: "Then there's nothing I can get for you, my lord? Nothing at all you want?"

Norton shook his head. Good old Sacks—he would never employ the like of Sacks again!

"Nothing, thanks," he said. "I want—nothing at all. . . ."

§ IV

That decision, ostensibly nothing more than the decision of an idle man of fashion to migrate from country to town, marked in reality the end of the long story that had begun when, at the Swedish Ambassador's ball, he heard his name called and turned and saw *her*, sitting near a palm by the door, a gleaming tiara resting among the black coils of her hair. . . .

He rode over to Richbury on the day after Sacks' arrival, told Anne that he was leaving next morning, and thanked her for her kindness.

"Don't be absurd," she said. "I'm sorry you're going."

He regarded her doubtfully. "You are being polite," he replied.

"No. I have enjoyed our rides together."

"You can't mean that."

"Why are you so unbelieving to-day?"

"Oh, nothing. Only—I'm afraid I've been rather a dull dog most of the time."

She looked at him. Her eyes, the best part of her face, were somehow tender, maternal. He had never seen Anne Caversham look like that before.

"You've had something on your mind," she said.

He did not reply.

"Haven't you?"

"I suppose I have. We won't talk about that. . . . Shall I see you in town?"

"I expect so."

"I must get my sister to bring you to my place in Great Stanhope Street one day."

"Yes. I should love that."

The black fidgeted.

"I must be getting back," Norton said.

"Really?" She paused. "Would you be very annoyed if I came across the park with you?"

"I wish you would. I didn't like to ask you. Will you ride?"

"No. Not worth getting Boreland out for that."

She fetched her hat, a wide-brimmed, becoming affair that made her seem almost pretty. Norton untied the horse. . . . Three figures—the tall slim girl, the big man, the stately beautiful horse—walk slowly along the drive, cross the decorative bridge over the river and are lost to view, among the grass and the trees, behind a ridge of rising ground. . . .

§ v

Next day, Norton, Sacks and the Diana went back to London.

It was a deliberate return to normality, to a practical common-sense attitude towards life and towards the world. The old status was gone. Norton Fitzwarren the notorious flirt, Norton Fitzwarren the ambitious promising young diplomat, and the broken discredited Norton Fitzwarren: those men were all finished. They belonged to the past. And the past is never a vindictive enemy. It is always possible to begin again. People forget, society agrees to overlook, the world and its personnel are constantly changing. In a little while, a

new life, quieter and fundamentally more satisfying than the old, would be open to him—the life of an ordinary member of his class, secure, benevolent, married, inconspicuous.

That was the intention. The detail had yet to be worked out.

Meanwhile, the Diana was still at Great Stanhope Street. Once, in the early morning, he had gone so far as to take her in a boat down the river, thinking to drop her somewhere beyond Greenwich, in deep water, where she was certain to be lost to sight for ever. But the journey proved abortive. The pleasant, easy rowing downstream filled him with a tolerant happiness, the satisfaction of possessing a healthy, vigorous body, in the prime of life. Somehow, it seemed unthinkable to consign that perfect marble to the mud, to stain those limbs with the primeval slime. He took her out of her box, looked at her. . . . No, damn it all, he couldn't do it!

For a long time he rested on his oars, there in the pale winter sunlight, a lonely figure between the long mud-banks, under the wide arch of the sky. . . .

In the end the Diana went back to Great Stanhope Street. Sacks put her in one of the lofts, beneath the slanting roof-beams, still in the same box which had brought her from Petersburg. By degrees, she became submerged, almost forgotten. Broken furniture, old clothes, the children's discarded toys, all the débris of family life, rose steadily around her. Life went on, the young grew old, the rains of forty winters beat audibly upon the roof above her—still she stayed, beautiful, intact. . . . Until, one day, somebody died. There ensued a great and ruthless clearance, a dispersal of mice and cobwebs, all the clamour and

upheaval of a sale. And then, I suppose, the dealers got her at last. Or possibly one of the children—Georgiana, perhaps, who wrote novels and was artistic—took possession of her, full of curious wonder that so perfect a thing could have lain up there in the loft so long. Georgiana, with the novelist's flair, would have sensed a story. But manners, fashions, change. It is doubtful whether the story set down by Georgiana's moral pen and orthodox mid-Victorian outlook would have been the true one.

§ vi

The marriage of Lord Norton Fitzwarren, younger son of the first Marquis of Stone, to Lady Anne Caversham, second daughter of the fifth Duke of Belgravia, was solemnised in London on March 24th, 1809. This much the Annual Register, the contemporary newspapers and the family archives make perfectly clear.

These records, however, do not indicate the precise manner in which the event was brought about. It would be surprising if they had done so. But people in town write letters to people in the country; gossip survives in the nightly jottings of many diaries; and, from one source and another, we are able to piece together the general characteristics of the affair.

It seems that young Willy Barron, Lady Sheen's Benjamin, got into trouble on his return from Russia. At least, he himself did not regard it as trouble, but in the eyes of his parents it was nothing less than disaster. Willy, in brief, fell in love with a young lady of easy virtue; and, worse than that, wanted to marry her. There was nothing particularly distasteful about the young lady. She was pretty, vivacious, good company; she moved easily among the Peerage and Baronet-

age; but unfortunately her acquaintance with society was limited to its males. The wives, the mothers, the sisters of her titled friends were unknown to her, and, from the circumstances of the case, always would be. Naturally, Cavendish Square was upset. Lady Sheen sent up signals of distress. And Norton, among others, was called in to help.

The precise details of what followed are hazy. We know that Willy gave the young lady up, and that his father, with some reluctance, paid her price. What is important to us is the part Norton played, and here the evidence is fragmentary. It is on record that he met her by appointment in Marylebone Fields, presumably in an endeavour to induce by persuasion a change of heart, to appeal to her "better nature" and so forth.

The interview, so far as its object was concerned, had no result. The young woman proved difficult to deal with. They walked for a long morning up and down the semi-rural paths, he urging her to abandon the absurd idea of marrying a penniless fellow like Willy, she obstinate, defiant and resentful. He couldn't understand her. In the end, he was even forced to accept the ridiculous proposition that this girl, this little piquant courtesan, was in love with Willy. It was a monstrous conclusion. Even Lady Sheen, with her great-hearted sympathy, would, he was fully aware, never accept such a view. Yet here the girl was, apparently determined to give up her life of luxurious self-indulgence for the privilege of living in wedlock with Willy amid the united and horrified scorn of all Willy's relatives.

No, Norton couldn't make her out. And by the time he had exhausted all his arguments, he had almost

grown to like her. They parted on the high road, without ill-will. A smart carriage passed at that moment, and he had to lean towards her a little to catch her words above the clatter of the horses' hoofs. . . .

That night he was due at one of the Trevivians' informal receptions, whither he went on after reporting to Lady Sheen at Cavendish Square the failure of his mission. Trevivian had got over the temporary coldness that had occurred between them a year ago. Friendship had flowed quietly back across the mud and dust of politics.

Norton was late. Glancing around, as on that night when he had returned unexpectedly from Petersburg, he thought how little seemed to have changed. Susan, once again, was seated by Mrs. Trevivian, shocking that lady at intervals with some frank expression of opinion or carelessly dropped fragment of vigorous language. The same groups sat around playing cards. Anne, as before, was at the pianoforte. And Trevivian was absent. Urgent business, a Cabinet about Spain, the lingering complications of Cintra, the uncertainty regarding Moore's army that was supposed to be making for Corunna, with the French at its heels—there were anxieties enough and to spare for a minister, in these days. Small wonder that Trevivian never found time to be present at more than the tail end of his own receptions.

Susan gave her brother a curious smile as he entered.

"We were talking about you," she announced.

He made a wry face. "Not *again*?"

"Yes. About the Willy Barron affair. I saw Lady Sheen this morning." She paused. "Well?" she added, with a significant inflection.

"Well what, Susan?"

"You know what I mean."

He nodded.

"What did the girl say?" Susan pursued.

"She wouldn't give him up."

"Nonsense! She's holding out for more money!"

"I daresay. . . . I rather liked her. I think Willy might do a great deal worse."

Mrs. Trevivian's face paled perceptibly, but she bore up well. "Ah, Lord Norton," she exclaimed archly, "you will have your joke!"

"He shouldn't joke on such a serious subject," Susan remarked.

"Very well. But I wasn't joking."

"Of course you were, Norton."

He shrugged. "Do you mind if I go and talk to Anne?"

Susan indicated that she did not, and Mrs. Trevivian smiled with ambiguous sweetness. He walked across to the pianoforte, wondering a little how such a broad-minded woman as his sister could feel so strongly on the question of Willy's choice of a bride. If it had been Goward or himself, it might have been different. Goward was hopelessly hidebound and he himself was fundamentally attached to the conventions of respectable society. But Susan was supposed to be emancipated. She had always been the wild one of the family. . . . It was, he supposed, woman's inhumanity to woman. He dismissed it from his mind.

Since his return to London he had seen Anne fairly frequently, sometimes here at Trevivian's, sometimes at Belgravia House, once or twice at Great Stanhope Street, whither Susan had brought her, at his suggestion. Susan had looked at him in a peculiar way when, with some diffidence, he had made that suggestion.

"You know, Norton," she said once, thoughtfully, "I believe Mother rather wanted you to marry Anne—now that I remember. I thought it damned odd at the time."

He had bridled. "Why odd?"

"Well, she's a daughter of the late Duchess, isn't she?"

"I don't know. I suppose so. . . . Anyhow, I promised her, when I saw her at Richbury in the autumn that I would show her over my house."

"Very gracious of you. What was it she wanted to see?"

"I really forget. Some things I brought from abroad, I think."

Susan smiled. "You're a poor liar, Norton," she remarked. "You always were."

Nevertheless, before long Susan arrived at Great Stanhope Street in her carriage, with Anne beside her, and they all drank tea together. . . .

Society, in a mild way, took notice. It was beyond everything piquant that the notorious Norton Fitzwarren, for whose favours women used to quarrel, was going to marry plain Lady Anne Caversham. But of course, it might be a false alarm. Fitzwarren was a bird not easily caught.

It is a commentary on the strangeness of that uncharted country, the human mind, that Norton's ideas regarding himself and Anne were poles asunder from the general attitude of society. Russia had done something to him. The old conquering assurance, the magnificence that had never been denied, were gone. In their stead, in the aching socket where they had been, the waters of humility had trickled in. And it is unquestionable that, walking this evening across

Trevivian's well-carpeted floor to where Anne Caversham sat at the pianoforte, he would have looked upon the suggestion that Anne might become his wife as a fantastic incursion into the undreamt-of, an end which, however much he might desire it, he could never achieve.

She glanced up at him gravely as he approached and her eyes had a strained appearance, almost as if she had been crying. Even when he was beside her, she did not give him her usual comradely smile.

"Hello, Anne," he said cheerfully, "I hoped I should find you here."

She smiled then—rather a watery, inadequate smile. "I wonder why," she replied.

"That's not very nice of you."

"No? I'm sorry. I can't help it. That's how I feel."

He was concerned. "Nothing wrong, I hope?"

"No, nothing."

"What's the matter then?"

Without looking at him: "I had a sort of shock this morning."

"Tell me."

"No, I can't do that."

"I wish you would. I might be able to help."

She gave him a swift, quizzical look, as though something in his words struck her as funny.

"It's too late now, I'm afraid," she said.

He tried another line.

"Nothing—to do with me, is it?"

No answer. Her fingers were still resting on the keys and, as though hardly aware of what she did, she played the first bars of the *Che faro* aria, that she had been playing on that other night, in this same room, that night that seemed so long ago now.

"Not that thing, please," he asked her.

She stopped at once, but her eyes demanded reasons.

"It has associations," he said.

"So have most tunes, I suppose."

"Unhappy ones, I mean."

She shrugged. "Did you have a pleasant morning?" she enquired with apparent irrelevance.

The unexpectedness of the attack found him without a suitable reply. Anne pressed on into the arena of his silence:

"It must have been enjoyable, walking in Marylebone Fields—in such delightful company. . . . Yes, I know what you're going to say. It is quite simple though. I was out driving. I happened to pass and saw the tender farewell. Very affecting indeed. . . ."

Her voice, conversationally pitched, might have been communicating some banal item of small-talk. "Why do you do it?" she went on. "Why can't you be happy without a pretty woman to dangle round? You aren't a boy now. You know the best and the worst about women, or you ought to. . . . And a creature like that. A woman you have to *pay*. The kind Lord Sheen prefers. I couldn't—*couldn't* have believed it!"

He began to recover.

"Why shouldn't you believe it?" he countered.

"I thought you had changed."

"And suppose I haven't——"

"There's no supposing about it. It's clear enough you haven't."

"Well, what then?"

She hesitated. "I'm disappointed, that's all," she replied at length.

"I don't know," he said slowly, "why you should be disappointed in me and what I do."

Then, at that moment, she looked up at him again, not quizzically this time, not with the ironic, mildly amused expression that she faced the world with, but sadly, yearningly—a long dark glance that reached his heart.

He drew a deep breath. Looking round, he saw that Trevivian had come in—pale, tired, trying to talk brightly to Susan.

"Anne," he said.

"Well?"

"Do you mean that?"

"I don't understand."

"Yes, you do. . . . The way you looked at me. As though it mattered to you whether I sank or swam. . . . Be quick, Trevivian is going to come over in a minute. . . . You love me, Anne?"

She nodded, almost imperceptibly, several times.

"You will marry me?"

"Yes."

"In spite of this morning?"

"Oh! My *dear*. . . ."

Trevivian sauntered up. "Hello, Norton. Hello, Lady Anne. You look very conspiratorial."

"We were talking," Norton explained helpfully.

"So I gathered. . . . Lady Hemingby has been telling me about your affair this morning, Norton. She seems cross with you. It was quite a hopeless errand, though. . . . Don't you think so, Lady Anne?"

Anne said nothing. She appeared to be as near bewilderment as a Caversham ever gets, and a dreadful dawning panic showed in her face.

Norton stepped into the breach.

"Anne—doesn't know," he said. . . .

§ VII.

There it is, then. The portrait of Norton Fitzwarren, so far as I am concerned, is finished. What happened after that night at Trevivian's—the long and blameless record of domesticity, the peerage, the grey hair, the uneventful embassies of middle age—these are outside the picture. And as it is no longer the fashion to furnish, in the manner of Sir Walter Scott, a coda describing the ultimate destinies of all the *dramatis personae*, there is nothing more to be said.

One odd little circumstance, however, may be mentioned. On the last day of March, 1809, a week after Norton's wedding, a boat sailed to the Levant, carrying a passenger—a Miss Joan Stathern, bound for Damascus. In the Bay of Biscay, at a distance of a few hundred yards, the Levantine vessel passed a sloop-of-war, returning to Plymouth from Spain. The sloop's captain was taking home despatches, letters and a few bundles of confidential papers belonging to officers who had been killed in the retreat to Corunna. Among these sad little bundles was an envelope bearing a coronet and, for identification, the words, "Colonel Lord Rookwith," with the name of the regiment.

Joan Stathern never came back.

THE END